EDITOR’S NOTES

EXTRAORDINARY FAMILIES FOR EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Last week I got a phone call from my husband’s longtime friend. He and his wife had made a 24-hour trip from their home in Paris (leaving four children under the watchful eyes of church friends there) to Provo, Utah, where their daughter is a freshman at Brigham Young University. She was in the hospital—doctors determined that her appendix had burst two days before she came to the emergency room. (She thought she had the flu.) Now, she’s in the intensive care unit, sedated and breathing with help from a respirator, fighting a severe infection. At first, her parents and grandparents and older sister were told to prepare for the worst—but then she started to improve, little by little. At this writing, she is making progress each day.

One wonders how people tolerate the disasters and tragedies of life, which we’ve witnessed and experienced this autumn. We learn the answer when something happens close to home and involves someone we love. Then we see that daily acts of love and care can help us strengthen each other in a crisis. The humor we share in our families, the efforts to teach and improve, our attempts to learn more about good relationships—all lead to extraordinary abilities to comfort and be comforted, bless and be blessed, by familiar and ordinary people and things. Thank heaven we have each other.

I write this the week before Thanksgiving, knowing it will not reach you until a time near Christmas. With the new year comes change for me, as I will be leaving Marriage & Families after seeing the magazine launched and seven issues published. Jim Bell will be the new editor and will do a tremendous job. I’m thankful for that and especially for the principles that guide this magazine and the talented, enthusiastic people who live those principles at work, school, and home. To them and to my friends and family, especially my forever sweetheart Alan, I can only repeat: Thank heaven we have each other.

Lisa B. Hawkins, editor

Marriage & Families is a peer-reviewed journal for young couples, husbands & wives, parents, and professionals—including educators, counselors, therapists, psychologists, physicians, social workers, nurses, public health people, teachers, clergy, experts in family law, and everyone interested in marriage and families. Our editorial board members belong to many faiths—with a common belief in the importance of traditional families. Marriage & Families is dedicated to strengthening families. Without apology, our name begins with the word marriage—a concept that many dismiss or completely ignore these days. However, since marriage and fidelity are essentials, not options, in a healthy society, we are pleased to bring you a publication containing credible data supporting this and other time-tested principles and values related to the family.
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Early in their marriage, James learned that his new wife habitually read in bed before going to sleep. Occasionally, he would come into the bedroom and find Liz asleep with a book in her hands. He would carefully put the book on the nightstand, gently take off her glasses, and turn off the light—until the night she looked up, apparently wide awake, and said, “I wanted to finish that book, but I just kept falling apart.”

Now, more than 20 years later, “falling apart” is still used as a substitute for “falling asleep” in James and Liz’s family. This otherwise-articulate family derives a lot of humor from wordplay. The right twist on the English language, dropped into a moment of tension, can invite parents and children to crack up with laughter and be ready to resolve problems.

Just as humor can help ease tensions, it can improve a person’s medical condition. Positive humor (not sarcasm or put-downs) has positive influences on us socially, emotionally, and intellectually.¹ No wonder author J. Morreall claims that humor is valuable in all areas of life.² Families can use humor to gain perspective, strengthen relationships, and cope with struggles. By noticing and collecting humor at home, families demonstrate a sense of humor and enhance family life.
Humor in the family isn’t funny unless everyone is laughing. Mutual respect, love, and trust allow family members to share and create humor. Humor perceived as controlling (“Keep laughing and you’ll be laughing all the way to your room instead of going to play with your friends!”) or sarcastic (“Come on, let’s help Rob review his spelling words—T-E-E-C-H-E-R; isn’t that how you spelled it on the test, Rob?”) can hurt relationships and create an atmosphere of defensiveness instead of closeness. Family members then may not trust the others to be gentle and to protect each other from harshness or unkindness. Moreover, parents who can’t laugh at their own faults and are angry when their children notice parental imperfections may convince children that adulthood is humorless and grim and that parents and other authority figures have lost the ability to be compassionate.

Family members usually know each other’s weakness and fears. When mutual respect is present, they don’t treat those fears lightly or make a joke about another’s weakness. The love in a family is diminished by “humor” that makes another want to withdraw from the family. Appropriate humor unites the family with warmth, laughter, and a desire to be together.

Humor Can Improve Our Perspective

We can’t always choose what we look at, but we can choose what we see—our perspective on the situation. Katie, 3, and Brian, 2, were at home with Dad while Mom worked. Dad noticed that they were playing “go to church,” which apparently made it necessary for Katie to wobble in Mom’s high heels and Brian to shuffle along in Dad’s gigantic shoes. Later, Dad noticed that both children had on Mom’s shoes. “What are you playing now?” he asked.

“Go to work,” Katie replied. Rather than being upset because he wasn’t employed right then and his children thought working was just for “moms,” Dad laughed and enjoyed telling Mom the story when she got home. Seeing the humor of the situation helped him keep a good perspective and made a family memory they enjoy laughing about together.

In another family, a little boy asked his mother to help him find his coat. Mom said, “It’s right over there, on the hook.”

“No, that’s not mine,” her son replied.

Mom then joined the boy in looking around the house and yard. Finally, they returned to the coat hooks and Mom asked, “Are you sure this isn’t your coat?”

“I’m sure,” the boy said. “Mine had snow on it!”

These examples of the value of humor in improving our perspective lead to the conclusion that “Healthy humor used in a variety of ways can enhance the quality of the time we spend in our families together.”

Humor Can Strengthen Relationships

Just as politicians and other public speakers often introduce a serious talk with humor (many people remember President Kennedy’s statement that he was the man “who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris” because she had attracted the most attention), we can use humor to introduce serious discussions between parents and children. One mother reminds her children of etiquette slip-ups by saying, “Miss Manners™ called to remind you to introduce your friends to your parents when they come over.” Or she affects a Southern accent to remind a daughter, “Honeychile, a lady nevah entertains a gentleman in her bedroom.”

A touch of humor now and again can allow us to communicate while maintaining a positive tone in our relationships. The key is to make sure everyone is laughing. Any sarcasm or veiled criticism or put-downs—the unfortunate staples of “humor” on so many TV sit-coms—can cause lasting wounds. Comments such as, “Nice suit—NOT!” “Is your face always so broken out? You look like you have positive humor (not sarcasm or put-downs) has positive influences on us socially, emotionally, and intellectually.
chicken pox,” or “Rhonda will eat it—she’s obviously never missed a meal” will be long remembered, and not fondly. Teasing between siblings can quickly get out of hand, because we all know how others in the family are vulnerable. Family members (including parents) who tell embarrassing stories at the expense of other family members need to remember that some stories are not theirs to tell. If family members begin to accuse each other of lacking a sense of humor or have to explain that they were “just kidding,” chances are that constructive use of humor has fallen by the way.

Couples must be careful of the trap of contempt. Sarcasm, which often seems like witty wordplay, is a form of contempt that can lead to deterioration of the family. Other forms of contempt (name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor) are equally destructive. Whether between husband and wife, parent and child, or siblings, contempt undermines relationships and sometimes is disguised as humor. As marriage scholar John Gottman wrote, “contempt . . . is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It’s . . . impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you’re disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than to reconciliation.”

Humor, when it is an expression of kindness and not contempt, makes communication easier. It can also get a point across with love instead of being preachy or overbearing. One couple was worried that their son was getting home past curfew. After calmly reviewing with him the reasons for a curfew and being sure he knew of their love, the parents and son agreed that he needed an incentive to arrive home on time. Before his next date, the son found a clock and a note in the entry. The note read: “I am your new best friend. I love you and get worried when you’re out late, so I’m set for your curfew time. Please come home in time to turn off my alarm before I wake everyone up! P.S. And no fair turning me off and leaving again. Your conscience is your good friend, too.”

Susan and Joe had been vacationing in Mexico with their six young children. Joe’s work required him to return home a few days early and Susan, seven months pregnant, found herself shepherding her brood through customs and having to deal with mounting distractions and demands. “There I was,” she recalls, “out of money and out of diapers. I was trying to keep track of the luggage and the children. I was so pregnant I could hardly walk.” The customs agent looked from Susan to her six noisy children and back to Susan. “Lady, go right through,” he invited. “If you have drugs in those bags, you need them.” A shared understanding and humorous comment made Susan’s journey more bearable.

We all encounter things that are inconvenient, terrible, or even unbearable, it seems. We change what we can, but sometimes we have to accept and cope with unpleasant or awful circumstances. Humor can be a helpful coping tool. Researchers have found that humor can significantly decrease anxiety. It can also reduce psychological problems and distress. When a daughter came in looking miserable after running an errand in the car, her father asked what was wrong. The daughter began, “Well, the good news is that I didn’t hit the tree, or any people.” She started to cry: “But the neighbors are going to be mad that I

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**Humor at its loving best:**

- Harmonizes relationships
- Brings people together
- Offers hope and good will
- Discloses the truth
- Shows that love can be a laughing matter
- Attracts others
- Shows appreciation
- Awakens positive feelings
- Improves relationships
- Allows informality
- Promotes fun
- Enhances enjoyment of life
- Makes forgiveness easier
- Leads to praise
- Improves flexibility
- Opens minds and hearts
- Permits more cooperation
- Makes love grow

ruined their fence.” Dad could have become angry but responded with humor instead. He said, “Who knows? They may like the new gate in their fence, once we get our car out of it.”

Two adult sisters were devastated when their mother, aged 53, died after a long illness and hospitalization. But their aunt (their mother’s sister), after an especially bleak day of traveling and making funeral arrangements, began to tell stories about their mother, and the sisters remembered funny and sweet stories of their own. Soon they were all laughing and crying at the same time and their loss became more endurable.

After Art E. Berg was thrown from a car during a rollover just five weeks before his wedding date, his neck was broken and he was left a quadriplegic at age 21. Although his body no longer serves him as it once did, Art is far from being helpless and depressed. His life is full of service and activity. Among the other things that got him through, Art says peace came from learning to laugh again, particularly with his family. He writes, “I am not sure I would have survived the emotional trauma of my injuries and the complications of my new life if it hadn’t been for the wit, chuckles, laughs, and good-natured humor of my wife and family.”

Humor At Home

As humorous situations occur in our homes, we need to take a moment to notice and enjoy and record them. Researchers who studied humor in families concluded:

We found that high-strength families reported a large amount of humor among family members, and low-strength families reported fewer incidences of humor in their families. This suggests to us that it is important to use humor in building family strengths.

Keeping a family journal of humorous moments will keep us alert to the humor in our lives and may become an important family tradition. Parents and children can enjoy memories of a child’s inevitable laughable moments. For example, one mother made a note in the family humor journal when the daughter said, “I think we should all make get-well cards for McKenzie. She’s in the hospital because her independence burst.”

One family held meetings once a week where the parents and children could work out any scheduling needs. Each one took a turn announcing play rehearsals, soccer games, special projects, plans with friends, and so on. Dad announced that he would have to leave town on business for a couple of days, for the second week in a row. The family was astonished when 3-year-old Paul threw himself to the floor and, waving his arms and legs, cried, “Oh, the horror! The HORROR!” Dad chuckled (and thought he might limit his business travel) as he made a record in the family humor journal later in the evening.

A family can enjoy reading humorous books, comic strips, and poetry aloud together. Children’s picture books, such as Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs and The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales, quickly become favorites, along with classic characters such as Mary Poppins, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, and Amelia Bedelia. Children’s librarians at the public library and elementary school can recommend additional stories as well as books of poetry. Many children (and adults) have enjoyed Where the Sidewalk Ends, as well as No More Homework! No More Tests! and Never Take a Pig to Lunch. Many families have favorite films, such as The Emperor’s New Groove (Disney, 2000), It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (United Artists, 1963), or What About Bob? (Touchstone Pictures, 1991), among many others. Sharing these resources can provide humor for the moment and become a source of family “in-jokes,” or “secrets,” the mention of which can set the whole family laughing and strengthen family ties.

Families can share jokes and funny songs during long trips or an evening at home. Appropriate jokes may be found in Highlights for Children, Reader’s Digest, and Boy’s Life magazines. Children enjoy
creating their own riddles, original lyrics to well-known songs, and knock-knock jokes. There are, apparently, millions of reasons for the chicken to cross the road and millions of candidates for the honor of changing a light bulb. Funny tapes like the Prairie Home Companion Pretty Good Joke Tape (HighBridge/Minnesota Public Radio, 1996–1999), and suitable, humorous monologues by Bill Cosby and others are available at most libraries and stores.

Some of the best sources of humor at home are family tales. There are good laughs to be had as parents and grandparents remember stories from their childhoods. Children may see Grandpa and Grandma in a new light when they learn that Grandpa sneaked away from a nearby army base just before shipping out to fight in World War II to propose to Grandma. They’ll also love the story of the summer day when Grandmother was at work and Mom and Aunt Rose had a cookie-dough fight and a water fight (in the house) and all the trouble they were in when Grandmother came home.

When parents help children notice, read, write, collect, and share humor in their lives they are helping them keep a good perspective, relate with others, and cope with problems. Sherwood claims that, at first glance, laughter and the humor that inspires it may seem incompatible with the serious business of our lives. After all, helping people learn and improve is serious business. Still, as humor finds a place in our lives it can build bridges between family members and encourage the flexibility and creativity that enable us to do our best work.²⁰

So go ahead and develop that sense of humor. It’s important for a healthy family and a happy home!

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References
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 305.
rdinary, small, regular—prosaic—father-child interactions may be crucial to good father-child relationships. Yet these interactions are threatened when fathers live apart from children. Evidence suggests that father-child relationships in areas such as visitation, communication, recreation, and education help noncustodial fathers maintain stronger connections to their children.

When Thom Hunter was growing up, he didn’t have a father in his home. Someday, he knew, he wanted to be a dad, and he felt that a dad’s number one responsibility is to “be there, not to miss the events, momentous and miniature, that bind a father to his children.” In his research, K. J. Daly found that fathers felt spending time with their children was the “primary standard of good fatherhood.” In most cases of divorce, noncustodial fathers are limited in their ability to uphold this primary standard of “being there” and spending time.

Most parents assume they will spend time with their children in ordinary ways, such as bed and meal times; that families will interact with each other daily. By their frequency, these events become so ordinary that they rarely stand out as notable. The term prosaic refers to the common or ordinary, and in family life, there is much that is prosaic. However, when divorce disrupts family
structure, it also substantially diminishes family processes, many of which are prosaic. How can fathers who don’t live with their children “be there”? How can they be “good fathers” during specified times or intermittent intervals? How do they create the prosaics of family life from a distance and on their own?

This article focuses on fathers who have chosen to build and maintain relationships with the children they don’t live with. We wanted to explore how noncustodial fathers re-create prosaic connections rather than become special-occasion or “Disneyland” dads. We wanted to know why these noncustodial fathers maintain involvement in their children’s lives when too many men in their situation do not. In addition, we wanted to know how they do it, including specific actions they take to “be there” for their children.

Do Kids Need Dads, or Do Dads Need Kids?

For most men, parenting is a package deal, and marriage is part of the package. When divorce occurs, it often dissolves the family as well as the marriage.3 Marriage brings a certain amount of structure to life in relation to the family; activities are usually centered on the home. After the dissolution of his marriage, a noncustodial father lacks the structure commonly associated with family life. Many areas of his life undergo significant change.

P. A. Cowan refers to such transitional rebuilding times as “periods of deorganization in which almost everything is out-of-sync.”4 Cowan defines a developmental transition as a long-term process that results in a qualitative reorganization of both inner life and external behavior. The loss of family life as it has been requires major structural changes in a father’s behavior and his physical world. In addition, he must cope with the sense of loss he feels for his children. For three-fourths of noncustodial fathers, that sense of loss becomes real as they generally have diminishing contact over time.5

There has been growing recognition of the value and importance of fathers in the daily care of their children.6 Scholars generally agree that one of the important causes of emotional problems in children of divorce is their diminished contact with their fathers.7 Studies cited by Warshak, Biller, Blankenhorn, Popenoe, Lamb, and Parke8 found that fathers play a significant role in the development of their children’s social competence, goal motivation, academic achievement, moral development, and self-control, among other things. In addition, we know that children fare better when their fathers continue to take an active part in their lives after separation or divorce.9 But the problem remains that children of divorce are largely deprived of significant time with dad.10 Moreover, fathers are important figures in children’s lives, for good or for ill, whether or not they continue to be active fathers.11

Scholars have devoted less attention, however, to the importance a father places on his interaction with his child. A father’s adult development is threatened by divorce.12 Fathers “need to be needed”13; most want to feel that they make a difference in the lives of their children. Being a father with restricted influence over his children doesn’t feel like fatherhood.14 When it doesn’t feel like fatherhood, it may be hard to act like a father. However, such a removal is not only detrimental to his children, it is developmentally threatening to the noncustodial father, as well.

Umberson and Williams, in their study of noncustodial fathers, stated that “through marriage and parenthood, men become husbands and fathers—roles that are central to male identity. In turn, divorce may represent an important social and
personal failure to men.” Specifically, Popenoe says, childrearing encourages men to “develop those habits of character, including prudence, cooperativeness, honesty, trust and self-sacrifice that can lead to achievement as an economic provider. . . . and having children typically impresses on men the importance of setting a good example.” Thus, noncustodial fathers who have limited involvement with their children may be at risk developmentally. Snarey wrote that “Generative parents provide important support for their children’s development and, in turn, children provide opportunities for parents to satisfy their own developmental need[s].” Children need a dad; but just as important, dads need their children.

Fatherhood on the Fringe

Why is it that most fathers who do not live with their children have such a hard time staying involved in any significant way with those children over time? Previous research points to four important factors: (1) conflict with the ex-wife; (2) inexperience with maintaining relationships with the children; (3) role ambiguity and psychological juggling; and (4) a feeling of powerlessness. Our research seeks to explore the possible role of a fifth factor: the loss of prosaic connections.

Conflict with an ex-wife. Many studies report that the main reason fathers decrease, or even cease, involvement with their children is the continued problematic relationship with the mother, who is usually the custodial parent. Fox and Blanton found that the “one factor identified consistently across studies as most salient in constraining the relationship [of noncustodial fathers] with their children . . . is the nature of the relationship with the former wife.” Many fathers feel that they are “father by permission of the mother.” The presence of conflict and hostility often prevents the father from seeking frequent contact with the child. This may be due to continued conflict with his former wife or his feelings that the child is better off without constant exposure to animosity between the parents. Thus, it seems unlikely that a lack of love keeps most noncustodial fathers from their children; rather, it is the lack of a good relationship with their ex-wives that cripples them in their efforts to continue relationships with their children. It is important for men to find effective ways to manage the anger in their relationship with their ex-wives, rather than cutting themselves off from their children.

Inexperience in maintaining relationships with the children. In addition to conflict with the ex-wife, however, there are other barriers to noncustodial fathers’ continued involvement in their children’s lives. In their report on responsible fathering, Doherty and his colleagues stated, “One might say that in American culture, a woman is a mother all of her life, but a man is a father if he has a wife.” During marriage, many men rely on their wives to facilitate relationships with their children. And, although fathers’ involvement with their children has increased substantially in the past few decades, many fathers have not taken the time to learn how to initiate interaction themselves, or have spent little time assuming sole responsibility for their young children. Following divorce, a father must create new routines in areas that may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for him. Divorce may present the first opportunity some fathers take to learn about and establish independent relationships with their children. Many succeed, but many struggle.

Role ambiguity and psychological juggling. Noncustodial
fathers are uncertain about their responsibilities. They must be both mother and father to their children on an intermittent basis, then go back to life without their children in their homes. They have complete, short-term responsibility for their children, then return to fatherhood on the fringe. Men have difficulty balancing this physical and mental juggling act. Noncustodial fathers have to bridge autonomy and connectedness in strange, confusing ways. As C. R. Ahrons puts it, they must find ways of “letting go while holding on.”28 Not surprisingly, many noncustodial fathers struggle to do this.

**Feelings of powerlessness.** Along with the loss of nearness to their children, noncustodial fathers must also contend with the loss of authority or influence over them. Fathers are often unprepared for this experience. Research suggests that those fathers who feel they have some control or influence over their child’s upbringing have a better record of supporting their children and staying involved in their lives, as well as greater satisfaction with parenting.29

For men, strength is usually an important part of their masculinity. For the noncustodial father, his strength may appear to be in another’s control when it comes to interactions with his children. Therefore, he must find a way to channel the loss of this power into the strength to build a relationship with his children in spite of his feeling of powerlessness.

**Prosaics: ordinary and overlooked.** Helping professions often focus on the more dramatic aspects of divorce, such as legal issues, that noncustodial fathers face. However, there is another important barrier to maintaining ongoing connections with children that has received less attention, perhaps because it is too obvious and simple. That is, no matter how freely his child has access to him, the very ordinariness or prosaic nature of a father’s relationship with his child is diminished or lost, robbing him of day-to-day time and commonplace experiences that are difficult to replace. G. S. Morson provides a provocative perspective on the importance of the prosaic in our lives:

Prosaics questions whether the most important events may not be the most ordinary and everyday ones—events that we do not appreciate simply because they are so commonplace.

. . . Cloaked in their very ordinarieness, the prosaic events that truly shape our lives—escape our notice.

. . . What if the important events are not the great ones, but the infinitely numerous and apparently inconsequential ordinary ones, which, taken together, are far more effective and significant? After all, memorable events are memorable just because they are exceptional.30

Noncustodial fathers must work hard to re-create the prosaic element for themselves and their children, since it no longer exists. As some scholars have said:

After divorce, fathers retain the status of father, but the roles associated with fatherhood are difficult to maintain if the father and child no longer live in the same household. . . . When a father loses the daily, routine, familiar opportunities to parent after divorce, his identity as a father is expected to be affected.31

Some noncustodial fathers want to continue a relationship with their children that reflects their former closeness. They find a way to overcome the hardships—large and small—that confront them when divorce splits their family. Our study sought to examine the role that prosaic experiences play in these fathers’ relationships with their children. We hypothesized that noncustodial fathers who succeed at maintaining strong relationships with their children find a way to create prosaic connections with them. In essence, they insert the ordinary into extraordinary circumstances. In addition, we wanted to know what motivates those divorced
fathers who make the effort to maintain prosaic connections with their children.

**Interviews**

The most helpful information in our study came from interviews with noncustodial fathers. Interviews are a useful way to investigate sensitive or touchy matters such as divorce and men’s feelings about children who do not live with them. We used a “purposeful selection” that was “information rich.” That is, we included fathers who “exemplify [the] characteristics of interest, [and] the situation of the sample is determined according to the needs of the study, and not according to external criteria, such as random selection.”

The fourteen fathers we interviewed had been divorced from less than one year to more than twenty years. Several had remarried, but many were still single. Some had been through a second divorce. They had as few as one and as many as six biological children. We asked these noncustodial fathers to share stories and experiences that illustrated their efforts, successes, and failures while trying to maintain strong relationships with their children.

All of the fathers interviewed said they enjoyed the time they spent with their children. This enjoyment was often coupled with guilt, as they wished they could spend more time or do more with their children; an interesting observation, since it was obvious they were more intimately involved with their children than what statistics indicate is true for most noncustodial fathers. These fathers often went to heroic lengths to create prosaic outcomes. At times their efforts were less strenuous, but they made a conscious decision to be involved in their children’s lives.

Our analysis of the interviews found four areas where these fathers expended concern and effort for their children: visitation, communication, recreation, and education. Each area has a clear connection to the prosaic—the simple, daily, regular, ordinary nature of family life.

**Visitation.** The fathers didn’t plan on having the relationship with their children reduced to directions on a piece of paper, as though relationships could be run by recipe and still grow and develop “naturally.” Guttman says that “the maintenance of a close and meaningful bond by adhering to [a] rigid visiting schedule tends to obstruct the natural ebb and flow of a normal relationship.”

Researchers know that this is tough for fathers. There is no question that, in most instances, it is beneficial to include the father as part of the family system. The fathers in our study expressed their sadness over the loss of a former relationship that included the more prosaic parts of family life. Brad tells how even regular visits can’t replace an everyday relationship: “[It] was really hard right at first with the divorce because you go through a period of time where, as a father, you’re so lonely in the first place, you want to overcompensate, you want to show the kids that you love them so much and that you care about them . . . you miss that relationship so much. When you go from having them every day, you know, the day-to-day things, as a father you miss tucking them into bed, saying their prayers, reading a book. It might just be coming home from work and asking them how their day at school was. It can be anything like that.”

Ken shares similar feelings as he talks about missing out on the simple, everyday parts of the relationship with his children: “It was a tremendous feeling of loss for me, tremendous regret to think about what it’s like when children first get up in the morning.”
morning . . . to give them a big hug and a kiss and to be with them at the end of the day and to have dinner with them on a regular basis. The ability to just have all the little things . . . . You want a full experience as a father, you want them to feel full love and you want them to feel it continually, you want them to feel it [all] month and not four days a month. That has weighed heavy on me.”

Although these fathers expressed their sense of loss, they continued in their efforts to build an ongoing relationship with their children. Several fathers mentioned their attempts to make their house a home for their children. They would have rooms especially for them so the children felt they had a physical place in their father’s lives. Andrew bought a townhouse with three bedrooms and put the children’s names on their bedroom doors and had them help furnish the rooms. Ron related how it was important to him to “make your home your kids’ home—their own bedrooms, their own clothes. Instead of making them feel like they’re just a visitor.”

Brian said that one of the successes he has experienced as a noncustodial father is “having the ability to provide a home that allows them to have their own rooms and clothes. A neighborhood that has friends that are true to my children, that call to have them spend the night and wait anxiously for them to arrive at 6 p.m. on Friday nights. . . . That is my largest success.”

These noncustodial fathers knew it was important to have a home for themselves and for their children, a place where they could build new experiences and memories.

It appears these fathers want to do the best they can for their children in the limited amount of visitation time they have. They thought about their children and were sensitive to the value of making visitation time as ordinary as possible.

Communication: One of the simplest but most consistent things these noncustodial fathers did was call their children regularly on the telephone. Some fathers have a set day when they always call; others make contact a couple of times a week or as needed. Andrew tells how important these phone calls are: “I would always call and chat with them on Sunday morning. I used Sunday morning as the phone rates were lower, and the children were likely to be home and rested after a good night of sleep. To call on a weeknight after a long and stressful day would not be a relaxing time for either them or me. This pattern has continued for 22 years, to the point that if I don’t call on Sunday to check on their week, they feel ignored.”

Brian has two young children and says: “In short, compensation [for day-to-day contact] takes place over the telephone. I call my kids a few times a week and they call me a couple of times over the two-week period. My daughter (who is 3) has especially taken to calling me, which I enjoy immensely and consider it to be nothing short of a gift.”

At times fathers feel the limitations of the phone, as Mark expresses: “Sometimes they don’t have time for me on the phone. . . . You can’t pick a kid up over the phone and play games or whatever. Sometimes I get really hurt because they’re watching a show and how do I compete with Darth Vader?”

Another communication method commonly used by noncustodial fathers is sending their children mail. When Ron’s children were young, they lived in another state. He bought a giant pad of newsprint and drew them picture letters that they could hang on their wall. When they got older, he bought blank puzzles and drew picture stories involving the kids to send to them.

Several fathers also mentioned the use of computers for keeping in touch. Rob put together a computer for his children using spare parts. He teaches them how to maintain and work on computers. Brian and Steve created web sites for their children. Steve also was in the process of building a computer with video conferencing capabilities, which he felt could give them the opportunity to be more personal. Ron uses computers to help his boys
with school research projects, then transmits the information via e-mail. For Andrew, e-mail has become an important way of staying connected to his adult children.

Whatever means they used, all the fathers stressed the importance of communication. They communicated with their children frequently when they were physically apart.

Recreation. Most of the fathers in this study talked about the importance of sports in staying connected with their children. Sports are a common, ordinary part of children's daily lives; this seemed especially true for boys. Ken, who lives in another state than his four sons, always plays basketball and football with them on visits. They also enjoy recreational sports such as bowling, swimming, and miniature golf. He talked about the importance to their relationship of attending sports events: “I think probably as important to them, and as important to me as anything we ever did, were all the athletic activities, attending all the different events. Sometimes this was difficult to orchestrate, because with four boys going all over the state, it was difficult to be at everything and stretch yourself so thin. Athletics was, and has always been, an extremely important part of our relationship as a father with his sons. I think that really imbedded in their brains how much I loved them and how much I wanted to be at any event that was important to them and when I was there, how important that event was to me.”

Several fathers who live close to their children have been able to coach both their sons and daughters on their sports teams. This gives them more time outside of their regular visitation with their children. Fathers also mentioned attending sporting events and watching them on TV with their children. They biked together and went boating, rollerblading, fishing, hiking, and climbing. Fathers and children influence and make connections with one another as they engage in common activities that parents and children usually share.

Education. Another important area in which these noncustodial fathers were involved was their children’s education. Ryan gets involved with parent-teacher task forces at his children’s school. He says: “By keeping involved, I am aware of what my girls are doing in school regarding particular subjects. Also, their teachers now see me as an interested parent and are comfortable and more likely to discuss the children and what they are doing.”

Ryan joined his daughters for lunch at their school and even started a “Breakfast with Dad” fundraiser, now in its fifth year, at the school. Brad brings the treats to school on his sons’ birthdays. There he interacts with the class and gets to tell stories about his boys. Assemblies, performances, field days, and parent-teacher conferences are all school activities that these fathers have participated in or attended.

Educational opportunities are not limited to formal activities, however. Mark uses the time he has with his children while transporting them between his home and their mother’s home to tell them stories: “I always tell them superkid stories. They’re the superkids and I kind of trick them because I try and teach them while I’m telling the stories.”

Andrew says to read to small children, “read to them again and again and again.” Ron did just that even though he lived in another state than his children.

“I did some books on tape so they could have story time with me at night. I just read books and rang a little bell when it was time to turn the page and then I’d send them the book and the tapes. They
had a little tape player and they’d sit in bed at night and that way I got to read them bedtime stories when I wasn’t there.”

Most fathers are interested in their children’s schooling and want to encourage and assist in their intellectual development. For noncustodial fathers, however, everyday involvement in educational matters is challenging. These fathers extended their thoughts and efforts to become involved in common experiences of learning and education with their children, benefiting both.

**Why They Stay Connected**

In our interviews, we also sought to understand what motivated these fathers to remain connected to their children and what factors influenced them. We asked them to tell us why it was important to continue their connection to their children, even when it was difficult, or at times when it might seem the children weren’t benefiting from it.

*Sense of responsibility.* Some fathers made comments suggesting a keen sense of responsibility for the quality of their children’s lives because they created these lives and because the children didn’t ask to be placed in the situation they were in. Brian gave his reasons for his efforts to maintain a relationship with his children: “Unconditional love. My children didn’t ask to be put into this situation, and I consider it my responsibility/obligation to give them everything I possibly can in an effort to maintain a sort of distorted normalcy in their lives.”

Andrew felt it was important to have a relationship with his children “because I thought they wanted and deserved one. I also felt it was my duty to them and to society. . . . I owed them some guidance and protection.”

*Modeling or compensating.* For some, the motive to stay connected with their children came from feelings about their own fathers. These men were either compensating for what they missed with their fathers or they were modeling what they felt had been a wonderful experience. It seemed that there was no in between, no neutral experience with their fathers. Ken talked about what he wanted for his children: “I had a terrific model in my mother and father of parents that were totally committed to their children and loved us and I wanted my kids to have what I had. I felt like they deserved a dad that was interested in their sports, interested in their school, and wanted to hug them and express love to them and just let them know that no matter what the years are that we’re separated, that the love of a father doesn’t go away.”

Most poignant were the fathers who felt they had missed something. Mark said: “I didn’t have a good role model in my father. My father never told me when I was a kid that he loved me. . . . I felt sort of like a second-class citizen and . . . I just don’t want my kids to suffer the same fate I suffered.”

Steve shares his feelings of loss: “Even though I had a great stepfather, I still feel cheated [that] my real father didn’t stick around. To this day I can’t understand how a father can leave his own child.”

Ron stated simply, “One of the things that happens to you is you try and become the father that you wanted and never had.” These fathers passed on their positive experiences with their fathers, or they turned negative experiences into a positive outcome. To the benefit of their children, they were able to make a choice to do their best.

**Overcoming Obstacles to Connection**

These men stayed connected to their children despite significant challenges experienced by most noncustodial fathers. One of these challenges involved coping with ongoing conflict with the ex-wife. It surprised us to find that the fathers we interviewed faced the same difficulties other noncustodial fathers deal with. We expected these fathers would be relatively exempt from some of the problems that other noncustodial fathers face, and this was what enabled them to have sustained high-quality contact with their children. We assumed it was because it was easier for them. In many cases,
Suggestions for Maintaining Prosaic Connections Between Noncustodial Fathers and Their Children

1. Visitation
   a. Tell them you will see them at a certain time so they have a time to look forward to seeing you again.
   b. Make your home their home; if possible, have their own clothes and toys at your home.
   c. Develop routines you can all participate in (e.g., reading, church, sports, scouts).
   d. Involve them in household projects (e.g., making dinner, mowing lawns, cleaning up).
   e. If older children work, and it doesn’t interfere with their jobs, make short visits at their jobs.

2. Communication
   a. Stay in touch regularly. Let your children know how to contact you.
   b. Set up a certain day and time to call.
   c. Get them a phone card.
   d. Send them mail. If you travel, send postcards.
   e. Send certificates about their accomplishments or just about them.
   f. Send large picture letters to young children to “read.” (These do not have to be elaborate, just colorful.)
   g. Read stories on tape, complete with a bell to turn the page. Send them the book and the tape.
   h. If possible, set them up with an e-mail account.
   i. Set up a personal family web site.
   j. Provide a photo album of things they do with you to keep at their house.

3. Recreation
   a. Teach them things you are interested in.
   b. Learn what they are interested in.
   c. Coach their sports teams.
   d. Take them to sporting events.
   e. Attend events such as games, plays, concerts, and recitals that they are involved in.
   f. Teach them things their mom might not have time for (e.g., how to ride a bike, dive or swim, rollerskate).

4. Education
   a. Know your children’s teachers. Call their school; ask for separate parent-teacher conferences, if necessary. Ask how you can be involved.
   b. Let your child know you will help them on school projects. Visit the library, follow through. Ask about homework in e-mail messages.
   c. Volunteer to help chaperone on field trips.
   d. Have lunch with them at school.
   e. Volunteer to bring treats for their class on their birthdays.
   f. Give educational advice in letters where you can reread your words, and so can they.
   g. Tell stories starring them as the heroes to teach and guide them.

our assumption was wrong. Many of these fathers experienced significant conflict with their ex-wives, and several related painful experiences involving the police.

Ron talks about why it may be so difficult for men to overcome the ex-wife factor and how he and his ex-wife cope: “Dealing with an ex-spouse is so aggravating. . . . You walk into a situation where you’re feeling a loving feeling, a caring for those children. . . . And how do you blend loving . . . [with] hostility? I don’t know how you put those two together and maintain the demeanor. So I think what happens for a lot of men, is that they try for a while and the conflict of dealing with the ex-spouse is so great that they can’t put those two together and it hurts. And so rather than hurt, they just shut it down and close it off.”

If conflict was an issue in their interactions with their ex-wives, the fathers in this study felt that time with their children was more important than avoiding those conflicts. Distance and the relationship with their ex-wives were the two factors that most affected how much visitation these men had with their children. They seemed to be able to adjust to distance. However, feeling like they didn’t know how their ex-wife would react from visit to visit was more difficult, as Brian relates: “There is only one main factor that decides how often I see my children, and that is their mother. . . . My ex holds all the cards, and short of a dispute in court, I am at her mercy.”

Most of these fathers came to the point of managing the conflict rather than resolving it. Andrew sums this up: “As a father you do not have to like and respect your ex, but you can be civil and polite to her in front of your children. The civility will be greatly appreciated by your children.”

Thus, it seems these fathers put the priority of spending time with their children and their children’s well-being ahead of the personal discomfort and stress that often comes with maintaining a relationship with an ex-spouse.

**Conclusion**

From our study we have distilled many recommendations to help noncustodial fathers stay connected with their children. In the accompanying box we have included suggestions in the four areas discussed previously—visitation, communication, recreation, and education. These suggestions are drawn primarily from the interviews, with a few suggestions from a website and magazine article (as referenced) and our own experience. These are minimal suggestions to help fathers think about what works for them. The important thing is to instill in the children the feeling and the confidence that their father is interested and here—even if he isn’t there.

Hochschild argues: “The premise behind quality time is that the time we devote to relationships can somehow be separated from ordinary time.”

The fathers in our study feel the loss of what was. Nevertheless, their efforts are focused on making the most of what is. These are fathers who are heroic in prosaic behavior; they are exceptional in maintaining the common, ordinary, simple parts of their relationships with their children. They have been able to instill in their children the idea that they will always be there. They do this by showing their children that they care about being involved in their lives in ordinary, regular ways, despite the daily separation.

According to our interviews, these fathers help their children to understand the limitations that distance and time put on dads who live apart from their children. These noncustodial fathers want their children to know that dad would be there if he could, that he cares and is on their side, so the children know that the person they called dad is still their dad. He may be gone from the household, but he is not gone from their lives. As one father said, “I am not a super-dad; I am just a dad who loves his kids.” Perhaps these messages are best communicated in prosaic moments of life, the very moments that noncustodial fathers are most likely to lose.
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References


13 Guttman, note 17, above.

14 Doherty, note 5, above, p. 286.


18 Pasley & Minton, note 12, above.


How Much Money?

Sometimes children think their parents are “rich” because a child will see that Mom seems to have a lot of money in her purse or catch a glimpse of a bank statement with amounts that seem large to a child or teenager. Give your children an idea of where the money comes from and where it goes with this game. First “withdraw” the amount of the family’s monthly income from a board game that uses play money, such as Monopoly™ or Life™. If the family earns interest on a savings account or other investment, include that amount as income. Place the money in the middle of the dining table and take turns “paying the bills” by removing money from the pile and returning it to a family member chosen as the “bank.” Younger children may need help counting money. Take out money from your gross income for taxes, medical insurance, and other payments that are not part of take-home pay. Deposit money to your savings account and explain that some of the saved money is for emergencies and that the other funds are for long-term goals, such as education or retirement. Pay the rent or mortgage, average monthly utility bills, charitable contributions, transportation costs, average grocery bills, clothing costs, children’s allowances, and other recurring expenses. If the family is in debt for education or consumer purchases, the parents may want to talk about their plans to be free of debt as soon as possible. Set aside money for a share of expenses that come up annually or unexpectedly, such as car insurance and maintenance, tuition, property taxes, gifts, or family vacation. As the pile of money shrinks, parents and children could talk about the importance of various expenses and how the parents and family members decide how to spend discretionary funds.

This exercise gives children a more realistic picture of the family finances, family priorities concerning money, how to live with a budget, and why family resources should be managed carefully. If the money is not enough to pay all the bills, the family could discuss ways to cut back expenses or earn more money. Money is a touchy subject in many families and can lead to conflict between the parents. If the family finances are discussed openly, with parents united in their priorities, the entire family can learn how to discuss money comfortably and approach budgeting responsibly. And one last lesson: they can learn that family discussions about money are confidential, to be kept private within the family.

Holiday Havoc or Harmony?

Whether you celebrate Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, or all three, you may have noticed more stress and less enjoyment each year. Christmas seems to
begin taking over sometime around Halloween, with store decorations and TV commercials leading the way. The expectations for creative decorations, delicious meals and treats, just-right cards and letters, and perfect gifts can combine to make the season anything but bright and jolly, especially for parents—but also for single adults whose extended families may think they have plenty of extra time. Not only does the holiday season wear out those who orchestrate it, but it seems to leave a few more debts and a few more pounds with the other gifts that were (hohoho) brought down the chimney.

It may be time to sit down with the people who share your holiday and talk about everyone’s expectations. Can the cards become a creative e-mail and the task delegated to the teenage computer whiz in the family? Would Mom and the family be happy to skip the dessert that takes Mom an entire day to make? Would a family nature walk to a nearby park or a caroling expedition be an acceptable and healthy substitute for yet another food-centered tradition?

Does your holiday center on gifts? If opening gifts is the “climax” of the holiday, is that what you want your family to associate most with Christmas—and is it all downhill from there? Perhaps the holiday spirit could move beyond Santa Claus with traditional post-gift-opening activities, such as a jigsaw puzzle table where family members can gather and talk while they find the needed pieces or dramatic readings of holiday stories like Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and Barbara Robinson’s *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.

A particularly fine handbook for examining Christmas traditions is *Unplug the Christmas Machine: How to Have the Christmas You’ve Always Wanted* by Jo Robinson and Jean Copsock Staeheili (New York: Quill, 1982). Available at public libraries and bookstores down the block or on the Internet, the book points out reasons for higher stress levels during the holidays. The book also suggests ways to have a simple Christmas without assigning the roles of “Christmas Magician” and “Christmas Stagehand” to Mom and Dad, respectively. It encourages us to “remember the people who truly need [our] gifts.” And the spirit of all faiths and traditions would indicate that the poor, the lonely, the sick, and those far from home should be included in our celebrations and devotions. We shouldn’t need a vacation (or a second mortgage) to recover from a holiday. Consider which traditions have become habits that no one cares about and lighten your holiday load!

**Family New Year’s Resolutions**

Go ahead and make your list about losing pounds or stopping smoking or writing in your journal every day—but don’t forget to gather the family and talk about family goals for 2002. Some samples:

1. Our family members will do their chores without being reminded.
2. Our family will have dinner together (with the TV off) every evening (or every Sunday or whatever day or days work best).
3. Our family will save for a great family vacation to (a place we’d all like to go).
4. Our family will work together at the soup kitchen/homeless shelter/children’s shelter/other service project for 2 hours each week.
5. Our family will read out loud from classics, scriptures, or other great books for 15 minutes each day.
6. Our family will videotape or...
otherwise record the life stories of specified older relatives at this year’s family reunion.

7. Our family will arrive on time, alert, and ready to participate in worship services each week.

Your family may not be old or young enough, or sufficiently populated, to work toward these suggested achievements, but you can make a big list of your family’s own goals on poster board and put it in a prominent place.

**Ten Ways to Keep Your Marriage Strong**

1. **Tell your spouse, “I love you.”** Showing your love through your actions is meaningful and wonderful. But the words, “I love you; I need you; I think you’re beautiful (or handsome); I appreciate you; thank you” never grow old.

2. **Tell your spouse, “You are so great!”** Be specific—“you’re so kind; you know just what to say; I admire the way you notice the beauty of sunsets and roses; you help me so much; you are such a good parent; you’re one of the most intelligent people I know.”

3. **Show affection for your spouse.** Kiss your spouse before leaving and after reuniting. Hold hands at the movies or while walking. Take turns giving each other backrubs and headrubs and footrubs. Play footsie under the table. Feed your spouse apple slices or orange sections—no hands allowed! Share a recliner while you watch TV. Sit on each other’s laps. Help each other with those hard-to-reach buttons and zippers.

4. **When praying together, express gratitude for your spouse.** Ask God to help with that project or test or ache or sniffle. Seek guidance to help your marriage be strong and your love unfailing. Ask God to be a part of your marriage and to bless you with increasing love and appreciation for each other.

5. **Encourage each other rather than nag about mistakes.** Help each other with tasks and goals. Talk about what you want to do in your wildest dreams (go to Italy? return to school? learn to make lace or create a beautiful landscape?). Then talk seriously about making those dreams come true.

6. **Laugh together.** Share funny stories or jokes. Remember your just-us-two overnighters and the funny moments connected to them. Look at photos and remember good times. Do anonymous good deeds and laugh about the pleasant surprises you’ve caused.

7. **Cry together.** Talk about loved ones who’ve passed on and remember the loving things they did. Remember touching moments—the birth of a child, the turning point when an illness or injury was finally going to be all right; the spiritual moments that have made you grateful to be alive and together; your wedding.

8. **Sacrifice for each other.** Do some chore the other spouse would usually do. Arrange for him or her to have a “day off,” whether that means a day at the golf course or a day at home alone. Make or buy a special treat for your spouse, whether you like it or not. Finish some task, or talk your spouse into resting and finishing later, when he or she is tired and frazzled.

9. **Remember why you got married.** Tell each other five things that you saw in your partner that caused you to love and want to marry him or her. Tell each other five things that you see in your spouse that cause you to be happy to be married now.

10. **Accept and respect each other as children of God.**

Source: Before Forever, http://beforeforever.byu.edu
William Shakespeare is immensely popular and at the same time is widely recognized as one of the greatest writers of both English and world literature. Every year millions view his plays both on stage and on film, and millions more willingly or unwillingly study his writings in the classroom. He is often quoted—sometimes out of context—as a source of wisdom on topics of all sorts. Those of us concerned about marriage and families might reasonably wonder what he has to say about these topics.

Family is certainly important in many of Shakespeare’s plays. The comedies usually involve family discord of some sort and almost always end with marriage. Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet would hold little interest apart from the wide range of family relationships in the plays. Like Shakespeare’s other tragedies, King Lear shows us families torn apart by conflict and betrayal. The Winter’s Tale is one of a number of plays in which families are subjected to terrible stresses but are ultimately healed and reunited.
The title of my essay comes from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and refers to the “holy cords” of human relationship, especially in families.1 The odd word in the title, *intrinse* (meaning “intricate, entangled, involved”),2 points to a peculiar quality Shakespeare wants us to notice about such relationships: they are so intricately bound together that pulling them apart seems to require not merely an untangling of connections, but an act of violence. The phrase from *Lear* should be meaningful to anyone who thinks family relationships are an essential feature of human life, especially for those who consider these relationships holy. For me, the phrase connects my academic interest in Shakespeare and Renaissance family life with my own experience with family.

What this essay will reveal, among other things, is that scholarship and literature are rarely objective or impersonal enterprises. I have studied Renaissance family life for twenty years or more because I want to understand Shakespeare better, but even more because I want to understand family better and experience its potential for joy and growth. I value family because I want to learn how to love. Marriage and family, which have been called a “school of love,” offer great challenges and opportunities for anyone engaged in that learning process. More than anything, I want my relationships with my wife and children and other family members to have the power and permanence implied in the phrase “too intrinse to unloose,” to be strong and positive and deeply grounded. In short, my academic work, my reading of Shakespeare, and my own family life both in reality and in aspiration all connect and shed light on, and sometimes raise questions about, each other.

During the past thirty years or so, academic study of Shakespeare and the Renaissance has been dominated by a negative view of marriage and family and of gender relations in general. The hold of this negative view has recently loosened somewhat and become more balanced. But the negative view continues to have much power. According to this view, marriage and family in Shakespeare’s time were essentially oppressive and unhappy, with anxious males seeking to control and with wives and children being either fearful or rebellious or self-destructively submissive.

Some versions of the negative view have taken a more subtle approach, acknowledging the happiness of the happy endings in Shakespearean plays and the expressions of love and tenderness, at least in literary pictures of marriage and family. But these versions interpret the apparent positives negatively, usually in one of two ways. One argument is that the happiness and love associated with family life were only fantasies, not the way life was really experienced. The other argument paradoxically views these positive ideals as negative in an even deeper way. Love, harmony, and happiness may indeed have been part of the real experiences of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, yet these highly valued and movingly portrayed experiences are really destructive, because they depend on submitting to relationships, roles, and social structures. More precisely, they are bought at the “price” of being a dutiful child or a faithful wife.

In *As You Like It*, for example, Rosalind, who has orchestrated most of the action of the play, ends by saying to her father and then to her future husband Orlando, “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116–17). She submits to these relationships willingly and has even arranged the scene of reunion and revelation. She has spent much of the play learning and especially teaching Orlando about the realities of marriage—in particular, teaching him that it is a union of two real, imperfect people, not the idealistic fantasy Orlando has been imagining—and yet affirming that marriage can be a loving and happy union.

But according to the dominant view in recent Shakespearean criticism, Rosalind is the unwitting dupe of social expectations and roles and is losing—or at least risks losing—an independent, self-created identity as she submits to her father and to her future husband. Thus, in this view, even in the happy, loving endings of Shakespearean drama, it is adult males who maintain control, exercise power, dominate, and have their own needs served.

*King Lear* has recently been interpreted in much the same way, although of course the tragic outcome makes the point even more starkly. Several recent writers—Janet Adelman, Peter Erickson, Kathleen McLuskie,
and others—argue that the traditional, positive view of Cordelia as a dutiful, loving daughter who forgives her father is dangerous because it makes her a victim. Cordelia’s actions encourage young women generally to serve the needs of others, especially adult males, and thereby lose their identities and even, like Cordelia, their lives, rather than protecting and promoting their own pursuits and desires.

How do I respond to such interpretations? I have wanted to believe that there is more to the positive moments in Shakespeare than such critics have found, yet I have also wanted to know what family life was really like for Lawrence Stone, especially his groundbreaking volume *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*. Stone argues that family relations were marked by distance and often hostility, with complete control and sometimes brutal treatment on the part of fathers, and deference, fear, and the expectation of obedience on the part of women and children. All of this supposedly took place with wide social acceptance and approval, so that an English father of this period was, as Lawrence Stone puts it, “a legalized petty tyrant within the home” who “lorded it over his wife and children with the quasi-absolute authority of a despot.”

My own effort to understand family life in Renaissance England has convinced me that Stone’s negative view of the Renaissance family is mistaken. Other historians, who present a much different picture of family life in the period, have challenged Stone’s view. Ralph Houlbrooke, David Cressy, Susan Amussen, Keith Wrightson, Alan Macfarlane, Linda Pollock, and many others demonstrate that family life did not change as radically or quickly as Stone maintains. They conclude that women often took a forceful and independent role in family life; that even during the Renaissance period, authority was much less arbitrarily and destructively employed than Stone suggests; and that intimacy and harmony within the family were not only ideals, but often realities. In his assessment of Stone’s book, Houlbrooke argues that “Much evidence of love, affection and the bitterness of loss dating from the first half of Stone’s period”—that is, the period most relevant to Shakespeare—“has simply been ignored.” Houlbrooke notes that, despite its admirable breadth and energy, Stone’s book is marred by its questionable assumptions about the connection between “ideals and practice” and by its “perpetuation of sociological myths.”

Macfarlane demonstrates at length how the book “ignores or dismisses contrary evidence, misinterprets ambiguous evidence, fails to use relevant evidence, imports evidence from other countries to fill gaps, and jumbles up the chronology.” Many historians understandably consider this Stone’s “most dan-
gerous and controversial” book. Some go so far as to call it “unconvincing,” “a compendium of distortions,” even a “disaster.”

One of the most damaging results of Stone’s influence has been the assumption by many who depend on his work that all the horrific conflicts and abuses in the plays’ families are a revelation of what life was like in Shakespeare’s time, not—what makes more dramatic sense—violations of the desired and expected norm for family life.

The evidence, viewed fairly and carefully, creates a complex and mixed picture of family life in the period, with negative elements but also many positive ones. In particular, fathers were not commonly the stereotypical villains that Stone’s work makes them out to be. In fact, although Shakespeare’s contemporaries viewed fathers with some ambivalence, they saw them mainly as nurturing figures. Attitudes in early modern England generally acknowledged the importance of paternal authority and filial duty, but valued other elements of the parent-child relationship at least as much. One of the most striking features of the Renaissance image of fathers—largely ignored or misrepresented in contemporary criticism—is its association with kindness, nurturing, and generous self-giving.

In an astute and persuasive essay analyzing cultural attitudes in the period, Debora Shuger has shown that fathers were usually thought of in contrast to kings or despots, rather than as repeating the king/despot role in the family. “Instead of conflating patriarchy with royal authoritarianism,” the common view generally assumed “that a father’s relation to his child [was] essentially different from political relations of submission, domination, and the struggle to acquire power.”

The word father, rather than connoting “authority, discipline, rationality, law, and so on,” more commonly was associated with “forgiveness, nurturing, and tenderness.” Even the court chaplain to Elizabeth I and James I, Lancelot Andrewes, “consistently and explicitly opposes the two figures” of king and father, “associating the king with power and subordination, the father with unconditional love and inclusion.” My own reading of large quantities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century material strongly confirms Shuger’s contention. Sources from the period indicate that the word fatherly was almost always synonymous with kindly or benevolent. One finds such phrases as “a most tender and loving nourcing [nursing] Father,” “a gentle and tender father,” “Were not his affections most fatherly,” “fatherly kindness,” “fatherly love,” “fatherly care,” “fatherly gentleness,” “fatherly and kindly power,” “benevolent and Fatherlie dealings.”

Obviously, the ideal and expectation was—in the words of John Newnham—that “the naturall and the kindelie love of Parentes towards their children, is, or ought to bee, as constant and readie” as God’s unfailing love.

We understandably wonder how well this ideal was put into practice. Shuger points to various indications—and I could add many more—suggesting that more often than not the ideal corresponded to actual fatherly behavior. Shuger paraphrases Steven Ozment’s judgment that “sixteenth-century parents appear to have been affectionate, often (to the dismay of the moralists) indulgent, and deeply emotionally involved with their children” and quotes Lancelot Andrewes’
claim that “Fathers stand thus affected towards their children, that they are hardly brought to chasten them; and if there be no remedy, yet they are ready to forgive, or soon cease punishing.” Shuger concludes that it does not “seem plausible that humanists and preachers would appeal so confidently to parental tenderness if such emotions were culturally unavailable.”

Much the same can be said of the relations between husbands and wives. Shakespeare's plays make it clear that not all marriages were happy, yet at the same time they convey a vision of potentially loving mutuality and happiness that many of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have shared. A passage near the end of Henry V nicely captures both sides of marriage. The Queen of France, although recognizing the challenges of marriage, hopes that France and England may be as happily united as a married couple ought to be: “As man and wife, being two, are one in love, / So be there 'twixt your kingdoms such a spousal, / That never may ill office, or fell jealousy, / Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage, / Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms” (5.2.361–65). Sources from Shakespeare's time echo the view expressed here and in particular emphasize the ideal of intimate love and union in marriage. According to Thomas Gataker, husband and wife “are neerer than Friends, and Brethren; or than Parents and Children. . . . Man and Wife are . . . the one ingraffed into the other, and so fastned together, that they cannot againe be sundred.” A wife, writes William Perkins, is “the associate” of her husband, “not only in office and authority, but also in advice and counsel unto him.” Among the hundreds of other examples that could be cited are passages from the popular preacher Henry Smith (“unlesse there be a joyning of hearts and knitting of affections together, it is not Marriage indeed, but in shew and name”); John Wing (conjugal love “must be the most deare, intimate, precious and entire, that hart can have toward a creature; none but the love of GOD above, is above it. . . . The Fountaine of love, will have the current run stronger to the Wife, then to any, or to all other”); and Rachel Speght (“neither the wife may say to her husband, nor the husband unto his wife, I have no need of thee, no more then the members of the body may so say each to other, betweene whom there is such a sympathie, that if one member suffer, all suffer with it”; “Marriage is a marriage, and this worlds Paradise, where there is mutual love”).

Such happiness and love require the offer of self in service, patience, and forgiveness, but (contrary to what some modern critics assume) this offer of self is required of the husband as well as the wife. Richard Hooker, a contemporary of Shakespeare's, notes that “parties married have not anie longer intire power over them selves but ech hath interest in others person.” According to William Perkins, husband and wife “are freely to communicate their goods, their counsel, their labours each to other for the good of themselves and theirs.”

Acknowledging that some husbands fail to live the ideal, Henry Smith advises that both husband and wife must offer themselves to the other: “[I]et all things be commonn betweene them, which were private before
for they two are one. He may not say as husbands are wont to say, that which is thine is mine, and that which mine is mine owne, but that which is mine is thine, & my selfe to.”22 The husbands and husbands-to-be in Shakespeare’s plays regularly make this sort of offer—for example, Berowne in Love’s Labour’s Lost (“O, I am yours, and all that I possess!” [5.2.383]), Claudio in Much Ado (“Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange” [2.1.308–09]), and the Duke in Measure for Measure (“if you’ll a willing ear incline, / What’s mine is yours, and what is yours is mine” [5.1.536–37]). Although, given the characters’ weaknesses, the offers are at times problematic, they are nevertheless heartfelt. The plays’ truly loving husbands and husbands-to-be are shown as sincerely seeking the good of their beloveds, even to the extent of offering their lives if that is required (e.g., Posthumus in Cymbeline: “For Imogen’s dear life take mine” [5.4.22]).

The ideals of self-giving, service, and love were not, then, associated exclusively with women and children, but served as expectations for fathers and husbands as well. Once this point is granted, much in Shakespeare’s plays makes more sense. King Lear, for instance, does not exemplify standard Renaissance parenting. Instead, he is at fault in his egotism at the beginning of the play, including his attempts to manipulate his daughters and use them to satisfy his own needs. The play shows how Lear changes, in particular how he learns compassion, humility, and submissiveness.

In what is often called “the reconciliation scene” (act 4, scene 7), Lear’s daughter Cordelia kneels to ask for his blessing, but at the same time he kneels to ask her forgiveness and says, “I am a very foolish fond old man” (4.7.59). He knows he has treated his daughter badly and that even now he is far from perfect: “You must bear with me,” he says. “Pray you now forget, and forgive; I am old and foolish” (4.7.82–83). Lear is only one of a good number of misbehaving Shakespearean fathers and husbands who humble themselves and ask forgiveness.

Of course the critics who take a view different from mine read the same lines and have access, when they choose, to much of the same historical information. The differences in our ways of reading Shakespeare ultimately come down to different visions of life and different views of what makes for human fulfillment. Most of the negative readings of Shakespeare and of family life in his time have assumed that autonomy is more valuable than the kinds of relationships that require the sacrifice of autonomy. They have usually put a higher value on self-fulfillment than on service. My own experience and beliefs lead me to a different view: that seeking our own lives—our own interests and desires in opposition to those of others—is self-destructive; that finding our lives requires that we, in a sense, lose them. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas says much the same thing: “I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an ‘I,’ precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual ‘I.’ So that I become a responsible or ethical ‘I’ to the extent that I agree to depose or...
dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: ‘He who loses his soul gains it.’”

This same truth is present in Shakespeare’s plays, and it applies to the men as well as to the women. In The Merchant of Venice, Bassanio is confronted with this truth—that he must lose his life in order to find it—when he reads on the casket by which he will win a wife, “He who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (2.9.21). This notion—the expansion of identity that comes by risking or offering the self—runs through Shakespearean drama from beginning to end, from The Comedy of Errors, in which Antipholus of Syracuse must “lose” himself “to find a mother and a brother” (1.2.39–40), to The Tempest, where

... in one voyage
Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis
And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
Where he himself was lost;
Prospero, his dukedom
In a poor isle; and all of us, ourselves,
When no man was his own. (5.1.208–13)

Shakespeare is one of the most sensitive of Renaissance writers—of all writers—to what it means to be an individual self. But he would have agreed with Robert Elliot Fitch’s claim that “the self-centered self is a sickly self”—and, it might be added, a narrow and isolated self. Shakespeare’s plays suggest that the highest fulfillment of the self is found not in complete autonomy or absolute freedom from all connection or constraint, but in the free offering of the self to others. Most often, especially in the great moments of reunion and reconciliation, these “others” are linked to the self by the ties of marriage and family.

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References
1 In the edition I am using the phrase reads “the holy cords.../ Which are t’ intrinse t’ unloose” (Lear 2.2.74–75). This and all subsequent Shakespearean quotations refer to act, scene, and line and are from William Shakespeare, The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans, J. J. M. Tobin, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
5 Stone, note 4, above, 7, 171.
10 Ibid. at 220.
11 Ibid. at 228–29.
12 The first phrase is from “The Epistle Dedicatory” to The Holy Bible (King James Version, 1611), Sig. A2v. The next six phrases, quoted by Shuger, note 10, above, 219, 221, 222, are from Thomas Becon, Richard Hooker, and John Calvin. The last two are from Shakespeare (Much Ado 4.1.74 and John Newnham, Newnams Nightcrowe, A Bird that Breedeth Branches in Many Families and Households (London, 1592), 9.
13 Newnham, note 13, above, at 3.
14 Shuger, note 10, above, at 235 n. 58, 222.
15 Ibid. at 234–35.
20 Perkins, note 18, above, 427.
21 Smith, note 19, above, 51–52.
• Explain to children what a hospital is—a place where people go to get well. Then, if the child must go to the hospital in an emergency, the surroundings won’t be entirely unfamiliar.
• Keep accurate, current records of the child’s growth, past illnesses or injuries, allergies, and immunizations.
• Talk with the child about the reason for going to the hospital, how long the stay will be, and what will happen. “Make sure your child understands that there may be lots of different people coming into the room to take care of him,” says Dr. Zipes. “Explain what a nurse does and that the nurse may come in during the middle of the night and wake him up to give him a pill. Otherwise, the experience of being awakened by a stranger in the middle of the night can be traumatic.”
• Be honest about tests and injections and whether and how much they will hurt. If someone says a procedure won’t hurt at all and then it does, the child will fear every procedure. Parents should, if possible, be in the room during medical procedures. Avoid telling the child to be brave or not to cry, and don’t help restrain the child if that is necessary. “Parents should be there for comfort,” Dr. Zipes says.
• If your child won’t be admitted for a few days, call the hospital and ask if it has a “tour” or if you can bring the child for a visit. Walk around with the child, visit an empty patient room, explain the nurse’s role, and if possible, show the child the places where he or she will be treated.
• While your child is in the hospital, stay with him or her as much as possible, especially during the first 24 hours. Bring your child’s favorite toy, stuffed animal, blanket, or book to the hospital. Ask your hospital if it has child life specialists, who are trained to minimize the discomfort of a child’s hospital stay.
• Try to control your emotions. Your child can sense whether you are afraid or distressed, and may become afraid or distressed as a result.
• Reassure your child that he or she is in the hospital to get well. Some children think they’re in the hospital because they’ve done something bad, they need to know that isn’t true.
• Include siblings in these discussions and take them to visit the hospitalized child, if possible—it can be frightening to see a brother or sister in the hospital, so siblings should be prepared, too.
• After the child comes home, allow him or her to talk about feelings and experiences at the hospital. Some children temporarily take backward steps in development—sucking a thumb when the habit was conquered earlier, or having accidents again even though the child was toilet trained not long before the hospitalization.
• Be loving, sensitive, and caring. “This may be one of the most important times for a parent to express love and admiration for a child,” Dr. Zipes says.

Every year, more than three million children are hospitalized for injuries, accidents, and illnesses. The National Association of Inpatient Physicians and David G. Zipes, M.D., medical director of St. Vincent Pediatric Hospitalists, have suggested some ways that parents can prepare a child for the possibility that he or she might be admitted to the hospital.

The National Association of Inpatient Physicians represents physicians whose primary focus is the care of hospitalized patients.
“Good-bye and keep cold.”

—Robert Frost