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# From Pain to Pleasure

## A PERSONAL JOURNEY

What was John to discover in our family? I hoped he would observe people who cared about serving—both one another and beyond.

This had been the first step, taken years earlier, in turning our marriage from withering to thriving. I entered marriage with the idea that my wife would make me supremely happy, that she would satisfy my deep yearnings for companionship and love. To be sure, I intended to make her happy as well, but most of my dreams focused on how happy *I* would be when we were married.

Six months after marriage, I was more miserable than I had been in twenty-three years. Before marriage, I dreamed about how happy I would be—now my dream had become a nightmare. I discovered all sorts of things I did not know before we were married. In the months before we were married, I dreamed about what it would be like at night in our apartment. I could visualize the two of us sitting in our little apartment. I would be at the desk studying (I was in graduate school), and she would be sitting on the couch. When I got tired of studying, I would lift my eyes, our eyes would meet, and there would be warm vibes between the two of us. After we got married, I discovered that my wife did not want to sit on the couch and watch

me study. If I was going to study, she wanted to go downstairs and visit people in the apartment complex, make new friends, and use her time socializing. I sat in our little apartment alone thinking, *This is what it was like before we got married*; the only difference was that I was in a dorm room, much cheaper than this place. Instead of warm vibes, I felt the ache of loneliness.

Before marriage, I dreamed that every night about 10:30, we would go to bed together. Ahh—going to bed with a woman every night at 10:30. What pleasure! After we got married, I discovered that it had never crossed her mind to go to bed with *anybody* at 10:30 every night. Her ideal was to come up from visiting about 10:30 and read a book till midnight. I was thinking, *Why didn't you read your book while I read my book?* Then we could go to bed together.

Before we got married, I thought that every morning when the sun gets up, everybody gets up. After we were married, I found out that my wife didn't do mornings. It didn't take me long not to like her, and it didn't take her long not to like me. We succeeded in being utterly miserable. In time, we both wondered why we had married each other. We seemed to disagree on everything. We were different in every way. The distance between us mounted, and our differences became divisive. The dream was gone, and the grief was intense.

## TURNING WAR INTO PEACE

Our first approach was an effort toward mutual annihilation. I freely pointed out her faults, and she mine. We succeeded in wounding each other regularly. I knew that my ideas were logical and that if she would listen to me, we could have a good marriage. She perceived that my ideas were out of touch with reality and that if I would listen to her, we could find a meeting place. We both became preachers without an audience. Our sermons fell on deaf ears, and our pain compounded.

Our marriage did not turn around overnight. No magic wand was waved. Our marriage began to turn around over the period of about a year, several years into the marriage. It began to dawn on me that I had approached our marriage with a very conceited, self-centered attitude. I had really believed that if she would listen to me and do what I wanted, we would both be happy; that if she would make me happy, I would somehow see that it was reciprocated. I had the idea that whatever made me happy would automatically make her happy. I find it hard to admit, but I spent little time thinking about her well-being. My focus was on my own pain and unmet needs and desires.

My search for an answer to our painful dilemma led me to a reexamination of the life and teachings of Jesus. The stories I had heard as a child about His healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and speaking with kindness and hope to the destitute flooded my mind. As an adult, I now wondered if I had overlooked profound truth in those simple accounts. With twenty-seven hours of academic studies in the Greek language behind me, I decided that I would explore the life and teachings of Jesus in the original documents. What I discovered could have been discovered in a simple reading of the English text. His life and teachings focused on sacrificial service to others. He once said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve." It is a theme that all truly great men and women of the past have affirmed. Life's greatest meaning is not found in getting but in giving. Could this profound principle make a significant difference in my marriage? I was determined to find out.

### LESS PREACHING, MORE DOING

How would a wife respond to a husband who sincerely sought to serve her? To discover her needs and desires and to seek to fulfill them? I began quietly and slowly to do some of the things she had

requested in the past. By now, we were too estranged to talk about our relationship, but I could choose to take action on some of her previous complaints. I started washing dishes without being asked. I volunteered to fold the laundry. It seemed to me these were the kinds of things Jesus might have done had He been married. When she made specific requests, I determined to respond cheerfully and, if possible, to do them. In less than three months, Karolyn's attitude toward me began to change. She came out of her shell of withdrawal and began to talk again. I think she sensed that my days of preaching were over and that my attitude toward life was changing.

In due time, I found her doing little things that I had requested in the past. She held my hand as we walked in public, she smiled when I tried to make a joke, she touched me as she walked by my desk. Before long, our hostility was gone, and we began to feel positive feelings toward each other. I remember the first day I had the thought, *Maybe I could love her again*. For months, I had had no feelings of love, but only pain, hurt, anger, hostility. Now, all that seemed to be gone, and it was replaced by warm feelings. I found myself thinking that I wouldn't mind touching her again if I thought she'd let me. I wasn't about to ask her, but I thought, *I wouldn't mind if she wouldn't mind*. Before spring the thought had become reality. Romantic feelings were reborn and sexual intimacy, which seemed so far away, had become reality. We had come full circle. We were no longer enemies preaching at each other; we had become sensitive to each other's desires. Our attitudes had become that of serving rather than demanding. And we were reaping the benefit of intimacy.

All of that had happened in what seems now a distant past. Now, here we were with two children and an outsider. We had sought to teach our children what we believed to be one of the most important ingredients of a healthy family—an attitude of service. Would John observe it? Could it be discovered by observation? I sincerely hoped so.

## How Families Serve

When I first began to lead marriage and family workshops, we used a Friday night to Saturday format. I would ask couples to bring a sack lunch on Saturdays. I would often ask, at the end of the Friday night session, “Who would like to bring me a lunch tomorrow?” Immediately three or four hands shot up.

Why do these people freely and spontaneously volunteer to bring a lunch to a stranger? Chances are they learned the attitude of service as children. They are eager to serve, and they find satisfaction in helping others. In a loving family, this attitude of service will permeate the entire family. Family members will serve each other, and they will serve beyond the family structure.

Cultural critic and bestselling author Bill Bennett lists “work” as one of the top ten virtues.<sup>1</sup> And the Bible is full of teachings and examples of diligence and effort—the book of Proverbs alone has dozens of verses addressing work (and laziness). Most historians agree that Western culture was built on the work ethic. Work is defined as physical and mental exertion toward the accomplishment of some worthy goal. And work starts in the home.

## CAN SOMEBODY TAKE OUT THE TRASH?

In the family, much work needs to be done. Clothes must be washed, folded, and perhaps ironed. Beds need to be made, food has to be prepared or purchased and served (does anyone still cook?). There is trash to be stashed, floors to be vacuumed or swept or mopped. Cars need oil changes, bills have to be paid, clutter cleaned up, pets cared for. Even with today's smaller yards, someone still needs to mow the lawn, run the leaf blower, or trim the bushes.

The list goes on. The work never seems to end. We may not have as much work today as in the frontier days, and many people hire help, but there's still plenty of work to go around. With most husbands and more than 50 percent of wives working outside the home, parents have limited time to get it all done.

Who will do the work? Hopefully, the family—all the family. In any sized family, there is enough work to go around. “The more the merrier,” the old saying goes, but it is usually also true “The more the messier.” John's coming into our family brought more clothes to be washed, more food to be prepared, etc. But it also brought another worker into the pool.

If work is such a fundamental virtue, then every family member should certainly learn to work. Some busy families neglect this responsibility, thinking it's more important for the kids to pursue activities like sports than it is for them to do chores. Or, the parents reason, “It's easier to do it myself.” But we aren't doing our children any favors by letting them off the hook. We can delegate age-appropriate jobs, along with basic training on how to do the job. When our son, Derek, got to the lawn-mowing stage (which, incidentally, is my favorite stage of childrearing), he always wanted to mow back and forth. For years, I had mowed the grass in squares, starting at the outside and working my way to the middle, which left the trimmings in a nice tiny square in the middle of the yard—easy to bag. I explained my

efficient strategy to Derek, but it never took. He developed a different philosophy—scatter the trimmings, and you don't have to bag. His back-and-forth pattern left light trimmings across the lawn that in twenty-four hours were hardly visible. I wrestled, trying to decide what was more important: my perfectionistic, efficient method or his creativity—his individuality. I opted for the latter. I refused to make him a robot or a clone, and that's hard for a perfectionistic parent.

Perhaps you are thinking, *So there is work to be done, and every family member needs to share the load. What's new?* “An attitude of service” is far more than simply getting the work done. In a healthy family, members have the sense that as I do something for the benefit of other family members, I am doing something genuinely good. Individuals have an internal desire to serve and an emotional sense of satisfaction with a job done for others. In a highly functional family, there develops the sense that service to others is one of life's highest callings.

A healthy family has an attitude of service to each other and to the world outside the walls of the family. Read the biographies of men and women who have lived lives of sacrificial service to others, and you will find that most of them grew up in families that nurtured the idea of service as virtuous.

Writer Philip Yancey notes that toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists—Newton and Maxwell—from his wall. He replaced those with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. Einstein explained that it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.<sup>2</sup>

## KIDS WHO WANT TO HELP, TEENS WHO WANT TO SERVE

An attitude of service is relatively easy to foster in the emerging child. As a baby becomes a toddler, she becomes a full-time explorer. In time, the explorer becomes a builder, and by the time the child is four, the builder has become a helper. The idea of service seems almost



innate. If the child is allowed to help and affirmed for helping, he or she will likely be a willing worker well into the first and second grade. In grades three through six, a child's attitude of service will be greatly influenced by the models in the family. If the parents have talked about service as a virtue and have helped the child discover ways to serve family members, and if the child is given verbal affirmation for such acts of service, the child will continue to find satisfaction in serving well into adolescence.

In the wonderful years of thirteen to eighteen, there will be dramatic changes. If the teenager has internalized an attitude of service, he or she will reach out in many ways beyond the family circle. At school and perhaps at church, such teenagers will tend to be servant leaders. They will spend considerable time helping others achieve. But they may not be as eager to serve at home. They will likely spend more and more time away from the family and may even show resistance to family activities.

They are experiencing another of life's great urges—the urge to be free. The whole point is to put distance between the parents and the teen, space to grow toward independence. Doors to their rooms will be closed rather than open (actually a wonderful idea to a perfectionist parent). They are getting involved in activities away from home. The opinion of friends may be more important than the opinion of parents.

All of this distance and reluctance to continue in the service mode at home often creates conflicts in the family. But conflicts are not symptoms of disease; how we deal with conflicts will reveal the health of the family. In a loving family, conflicts are expected. We recognize that people do not always think and feel the same way. Certainly, parents and teens will not see the world out of the same eyes. Thus, we should not be surprised when conflict arises.

Healthy families learn how to process conflicts. Rather than avoiding the issues, we seek to put the issues on the table. Teens are

encouraged to give their point of view while the parents listen. Parents genuinely seek to understand what the teen is feeling as well as what the teen is saying. Conversely, the teen listens to the parents' viewpoint with understanding ears. (Does this really happen in some families? Yes. It happens where there is a high level of security in the family.)

Contrary to some current thinking, teens really do want limits. "Is there anyone who stands for anything anymore?" a fifteen-year-old young man asked. "Everyone seems to accept anything, given the right situation. I wish adults gave us more guidance. Haven't they learned something during their life that would help us avoid some potholes?" Limits create boundaries, and boundaries give feelings of security. Security creates an atmosphere where teens can learn and grow. Thus, when the teen hits the stage of freedom seeking and may begin to forget the serving role in the family, parents must respect his or her desire to be independent but remind the teen that people are always interdependent and that serving others is a necessary part not only of family life but of all life.

Adults and youth alike are attracted to the young man or woman who goes out of his or her way to serve others. A number of years ago when I was directing the college outreach ministry of our church, I encountered four young men who attended the University of North Carolina. They had secured summer jobs in our city and had begun attending some of our activities for college students. I later discovered that they were all living in one small apartment with a view to saving as much money as possible during the summer. They had been attending activities only a couple of weeks when all four of them approached me and one of their more verbal members told me that they had decided to "plug into" our church for the summer and they wanted to offer their services. They would be happy to serve in any capacity I might suggest. Assuming that they were like many college students in those days, always thinking about the résumé, I thought they were volunteering for leadership positions in our

summer programs. After all, “Volunteer Director” of the Building Bridges to Youth program would certainly impress a future employer.

I expressed appreciation for their volunteer spirit but informed them that we had to plan our summer programs in the winter and that all of our places of volunteer leadership were already assigned. Their friendly spokesman quickly responded, “No, no. We’re not interested in leadership positions; we’re talking about service.”

“Can you give me some examples of what you have in mind?” I inquired.

Without hesitation, he said, “We were thinking that perhaps you could use someone to wash the dishes after the Wednesday evening meal or perhaps clean the ovens or mop the floors. Anything,” he said. “We just want to serve.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” I said, “I think we have plenty of openings.” Throughout that summer not only did they wash dishes, clean ovens, and mop floors, but they also washed buses, trimmed grass, and cleaned bathrooms. The people who were active in our church that summer have never forgotten “the boys from Carolina.” In fact, their “attitude of service” affected the whole direction of our college ministry from that summer forward.

Not all service will be directed toward persons. For example, many young people love helping animals. Elizabeth, a junior high student, told me of her passion for helping troubled animals. I found her by a community lake putting a splint on a duck’s leg. The duck had been hit by a passing car, and Elizabeth came to the rescue. All of us are impressed and encouraged by young people who “adopt” a section of highway or become involved in efforts to alleviate poverty in Africa. Such young people typically learned their attitude of service in the home.

## HOW ADULTS SERVE

The independence of adulthood is often the soil out of which genuine service to others grows. Adults choose to have children, knowing that such a choice means twenty-four months of diapers, five years of bathing, two years of nursing or bottle-feeding, spoon-feeding, putting on 308 Band-Aids (with some kids, at least that many each year), attending a minimum of 220 ball games, cooking countless meals, sacrificing to pay college tuition, and a thousand other acts of service. Yet we choose—freely choose—children. And some couples often choose to adopt a child whom someone else is unable to serve.

Service to others is the highest pinnacle humanity ever scales. Most people who have studied His life closely agree that Jesus Christ stood on the pinnacle of greatness when He took a washbasin and towel and performed a lowly act of washing His disciples' feet. He removed all doubt as to His intent when He said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. . . . Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, He told His followers that "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."<sup>4</sup>

It's a great paradox—the way up is down. True greatness is expressed in serving, not in dominating. No parents challenge their children to be like Hitler, while thousands continue to challenge their children to be like Jesus. Service is a mark of greatness.

What did John, our live-in anthropologist, observe in our family? He saw Karolyn, who is definitely not a morning person, getting up five days a week and cooking a hot breakfast for the family—an act of service on the level of Mother Teresa. (If you are a morning person, you will not understand this.) This morning sacrifice was not born out of compulsion. It was not something I demanded, or even

expected, though I unashamedly enjoyed it. As Shelley, our firstborn, reached school age, Karolyn came up with the idea that children needed a hot breakfast before school and that this would be one of her ways of serving the family. She saw it as a means of expressing gratitude to God for the gift of children. It was, I think, a noble expression of her attitude of service.

In twelve years, Shelley went off to college just as Derek entered high school. The hot breakfast continued four more years until the day Derek said good-bye and headed out to stretch his mind with philosophy, English, and religious studies. Then an era ended as quietly as it had begun sixteen years earlier. I went back to cold cereal, grapefruit, and bananas, which by that time was much better for me. Even now when the children come home from their adult pursuits, they talk about those hot breakfasts and what a pleasant memory they are. The memory is sustained once a year when, on Christmas morning, Karolyn again goes to the kitchen and repeats that ancient ritual of service.

What effect did all this have on John? This is what he said years later:

I don't think I appreciated it as much then as I do now, being older and having a keener sense of the sacrifice in the family, but from what I personally experienced, you made me a part of the family. I didn't feel like a boarder. I didn't feel like an afterthought or an appendage. I felt like I was part of the family. I looked up to you and Karolyn almost in a fatherly-motherly way. I felt like I was an older brother to Shelley and to Derek. In a larger sense, there was a sacrificial attitude in your allowing me to come into your family. Because it is an intrusion, it introduces a different dynamic into the household. I didn't have any sense of the cost of that then. I always felt like you and Karolyn had time for me whenever I wanted to talk about anything. You both were

extremely busy and active, but I always felt that there was free accessibility and I never felt that it was an imposition for me to be spending time talking with you. I remember Christmas, Shelley and Derek giving me a present, and that was very neat. I saw the family serving each other.

In a healthy family, this attitude of the value of helping others serves as the oil that lubricates the wheels of family life. Without it, the wheels run down, and family life stalls. With it, a family flourishes. Derek captures something of the climate that is created by acts of service.

### THE SERVICE OF LOVE

*On this morning in my memory  
I hear melody-chimes hanging  
from the doorway to their bedroom.  
Something singing before we awake—  
It is the Carolina sky breaking through  
my window. Outside  
the dogs and squirrels jostle  
the eye of morning open.  
Half awake, I hear  
the distant voice of mother  
making the miracle of bacon, biscuit;  
the fragrances of day  
call from the kitchen.  
Father's tender palms already  
scanning for today's breakfast truth,  
Sister fingering Chopin's scales  
into the sleeping heart of brother.  
And the rumbling flash of mother  
raising the melody of sizzling bacon,*

*scrambled eggs, rising biscuits  
to a new pitch—  
the pain of arising early to feed  
half-opened mouths, to feed still  
half-opened hearts, to slowly,  
through simple and painful morning,  
awaken gifts in us, call forth in us  
this lasting chorus.*

For more information on how you and your family can develop an attitude of service, see the code on page 177 to access the Family Adventure Guide at [www.5lovelanguages.com/5traits](http://www.5lovelanguages.com/5traits). This guide is to help put into practice the healthy traits discussed in this book. You'll find a number of assessments, things to think about, and opportunities for deeper discussion.