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And Tolstoy:
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Teaches about the
Collapse and
Recovery of Home
And Family

By David Patterson



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Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy: What Literature Teaches about the Collapse and Recovery of Home and Family

By David Patterson

In a Heritage Foundation lecture titled “The Fraud of Multiculturalism,” Russell Kirk noted that “cultural restoration, like charity, begins at home.” And he was quite right. For cultural restoration entails the restoration of what is most high, most dear, most enduring. And the ground for all such things is the home. The home is the place where our names are first uttered with love and therefore where we first discover that we mean something. It is the site where both human beings and human values first make their appearance in the world. It is the center from which we define and understand the nature of everything we encounter in the world. The home, then, is not one thing among many in a world of things; nor is it merely the product of a culture. Rather, the world of things derives its sense, and a culture its significance, from their relationship to the home. Without the home, everything else in the world or in a culture is meaningless.

Just as the home is not one thing among many, the human relationship from which it arises is not one among many. I am speaking, of course, of marriage, or, more properly, of holy matrimony. The sanctity of the home is rooted in the sanctity of marriage. And the holiness of human life is rooted in the holiness of this union through which life is born into the world. Indeed, from ancient times marriage has been a metaphor for the expression of the relation between the human and the holy. In the Christian tradition, for example, the Church is called “the Bride of Christ.” And according to the Jewish tradition, the two tablets given to Moses at Sinai signify a bride and groom, indicating that Israel is betrothed to God as a wife is betrothed to her husband. Marriage alone makes it possible to overcome a fundamental condition of exile and thus dwell in the world. Why? Because in the union of holy matrimony the seed of the home is planted. That seed comes to life when a wife becomes a mother and a husband becomes a father; it comes into being upon the birth of a child, when the family comes into being. The home, then, might be better understood not as a place or a thing, but as an event in the life of the holy.

Viewed as such an event, the emergence of the family that constitutes the home is far more than just a biological phenomenon or even a natural wonder. A mother, for example, is not just one who gives birth, but one who emanates light, love, and compassion. Through her humanity receives a revelation of the light created upon the first utterance of Creation, the light that sanctifies all Creation. Indeed, only through the wife and mother of a household does blessing fall upon a home; for as the bearer of life she is most intimately aligned with the miracle and mystery of life. Indeed, she and the Creator of life at times share the same name. In Hebrew, for instance, the Creator is sometimes referred to as *Ha-Rachamim*, or “the Compassionate One,” a term that has the same root as the word *rechem*, which means “womb.”

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Similarly, the father of a family is more than the sire of some offspring. If he is a father, then he is also a teacher who by his example imparts to his children and his community something about truth, tradition, and moral responsibility—about what there is to stand for and what we must refuse to stand for. A man, therefore, does not fully grow to manhood until he becomes a father; that is, until he becomes such a teacher and sets such an example, whether he actually sires children or not. That a father bears such a significance is demonstrated by the condition of families and communities that have been abandoned by their fathers.

Finally, the child born of the holy union of husband and wife signifies the dearness of all life and is a manifestation of holiness itself. If the world endures thanks to a direction we pursue, then it endures thanks to the child. For the child sets before us a direction and therefore a future, in which our most sublime aspirations, our most moving inspirations, and our most urgent questions might be decided. Those who have gazed into the eyes of an infant only seconds old and who have then looked up to behold the world transformed know what it means to realize, if only for a moment, what is infinitely precious. Infinity, you see, comes in small packages.

This gazing down upon the child is a looking up toward a height that elevates humanity from the realm of biology to the realm of spirituality. Here a survival of the strongest and the fittest is overtaken by a dwelling in the dearest and the highest. Without the home humanity loses this dimension of height that ordains and sanctifies all of being. Without the family we are left to a flat land that is a waste land and wander in an exile steeped in emptiness and indifference. Because the home and family have such a significance for human life, human meaning, and human values, a concern for the collapse and recovery of the home forms a significant part of much of the world's literature. For literature is not just a mirror held up to life. More than that, it is an interaction with life in the light of the truth that sustains life; it is part of the human seeking that takes us forever homeward.

In order to illustrate this point, I have selected three literary masterpieces that address these issues in various ways. While they come from very different times and cultures, they represent a human condition that is as common to all humanity as motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood. They are the *Odyssey* of Homer, William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. Let us consider, then, the various perspectives on home and family that these texts offer us. In doing so, we may see why these works, like home and family, are among the permanent things.

An Exile's Movement Homeward: The *Odyssey* of Homer

Most of us know the *Odyssey* as a tale of adventure, in which the hero undergoes various trials on his return to home and family from the Trojan War, a war fought over the break-up of a home. The adventures of Odysseus have a mythical quality that may at first keep his ordeals at a safe distance from us. But if we take a closer look at this tale, we discover its deeper, universal aspect precisely in its mythical features. For in myth, as Joseph Campbell has shown, a shallow mind may perceive only the local scenery, but a deeper mind encounters "all the stages of the Way from the ethnic to the elementary idea, from the local to the universal being, which is Everyman, as he both knows and is afraid to know." In the case of Odysseus the stages of the Way lead not only from the local to the universal being, but also from exile to home, which is the dwelling place of Everyman, as he learns what there is to fear and what there is fear for.

Every tribulation that Odysseus must endure, then, entails overcoming a threat to the integrity and the sanctity of home and family. Here we shall consider a few familiar examples to make this point. Recall, for instance, what transpires in the Land of the Lotus Eaters.

There, says Odysseus, anyone who ate of the lotus would “forget the way home.” What immediately comes to mind in this connection is the threat that drugs pose for every family in every home. But why, exactly, do drugs pose such a threat?

First there are the obvious reasons: Drugs lead to health problems, the squandering of resources, and a plummeting into irresponsibility. But Homer notes a deeper, more insidious threat to the home that underlies the obvious ones: It is the loss of memory. In the *Republic* Plato teaches us that “we must not list the forgetful soul among the lovers of wisdom, but we require a good memory.” A good memory is the memory of the Good, which is the mark of wisdom itself. If the Good first manifests itself in the home, then wisdom entails an understanding of the significance of the home. And since the home is the place where our names are first uttered, the memory of home includes a memory of who and what we are, which is the memory of the responsibility to and for the Good that only we can meet. To be sure, to bear a family name is to bear this memory. Therefore, according to a Jewish legend, when we die and the Angel of Death comes to take us to the Holy One, we must answer a question before we can find our way to God: What is your name? For to know the answer to this question is to know the Good that opens up the path to the holy, which is the path that takes us homeward.

What must be remembered, moreover, as Homer indicates, is not just the home but the way home. The home is not something permanently given but something permanently sought, so that memory here is memory of a direction. And that makes it the memory of meaning. For to have meaning is to have a direction, and to have a direction is to be in motion toward a good that is yet to be fulfilled. Memory, then, orients us not only toward a good established in the past, but also toward a good to be sought in the future. And this good, in the words of Martin Buber, “is the movement in the direction of home,” which is sustained by memory. Therefore, drugs threaten that movement homeward because drugs bring on oblivion, and in our world we have made oblivion into a multibillion-dollar business, not only in the drugs we peddle, but in the diversions we promote. Indeed, so dear to us is our deadly sleep that we ignore, ridicule, or even kill people who try to shake us from it.

In Homer’s tale, as in our own time, then, we find that violence follows in the wake of oblivion. For after the Land of the Lotus Eaters Odysseus comes to the Land of the Cyclopians, where, says Homer, there are “no laws” and “no one cares for his neighbor.” There the Cyclops Polyphemos declares to Odysseus,

Stranger, you are a simple fool, or come from far off,
when you tell me to avoid the wrath of the gods or fear them.
We do not concern ourselves over Zeus of the aegis,
nor any of the rest of the blessed gods, since we are far better
than they.

With these words—and with the consistency of a logician—Polyphemos proceeds to devour the companions of Odysseus.

The one-eyed monster here has a vision of only one thing: a power that justifies anything—that is what makes him monstrous. Where power is the only reality, there is no law other than the law dictated by the one in power. The monster does not act for his neighbor but manipulates his neighbor, even to the point of consuming him. And he has no regard for God because he sets himself up in the place of God, thereby regarding himself as better than God and in need of no one. Hence, he has no home that he might open to others but

seals himself up in a tomb-like cave, like an animal holed up in his lair, without wife or children.

Violence toward others does violence to the home because violence is an assault on the Holy One who sanctifies the home in the sanctification of the family through holy matrimony. And because humanity comes into being with the appearance of the family, violence aimed at God is perpetrated upon humanity. "He who kills, kills God," Elie Wiesel has repeatedly said; the Eternal is eternally the victim. By contrast, those who would nurture life rather than take life enter into marriage and form a family by bringing life into the world. This nurturing of life entails not only bearing children, but also affirming the sanctity of the other human being, beginning with our husband or wife. Matrimony derives its holiness from this saying of *you* to another person in such a way that we attest to the holiness of the other that derives from the Holy One Himself. This relation that lies at the heart of the family makes all other relations meaningful. For this is the relation that opens up a higher truth that is opposed to power. As we see in the case of the Cyclops, without this truth that is revealed in the home there is no law or care for our neighbor. And so it is no coincidence that those who do violence to others generally come from broken homes. When homes break up bodies get broken.

The oblivion that leads to violence against others also takes the insidious form of a subtle violence done to oneself, as well as to others, in the mode of sensuality. Here, as in the case of violence, getting physical means being reduced to a purely physical, animalistic nature, as Homer's *Odyssey* suggests. After escaping from the Cyclops, Odysseus makes his way to the island where the sorceress Circe lives. There his men are tempted by the voluptuous beauty of the sorceress, who gives them fine foods poisoned with a drug "to make them wholly forget their native land," as Homer says. And she then turns them into pigs. But they had already forgotten their native land as soon as they acted on the sensual, and they had already lost their human image as soon as they succumbed to their animalistic nature. When animal instinct overtakes moral responsibility, the human form becomes the form of a pig, and the home is reduced to a sty.

In contrast to this succumbing to temptation we have the refusal to succumb on the part of Odysseus when he was marooned on the island of Calypso. There he tells the goddess,

I know that...Penelope
can never match the impression you make for beauty and stature.
She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless.
But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for
is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming.

Like Circe, Calypso possesses all that sensual beauty can offer. But the home is constituted by the spiritual, and not by the sensual. And the difference lies in the caress. In the groping and grabbing of sensuality, we manipulate and appropriate the other for ourselves, for our own pleasure. The caress, however, is an opening and offering of the self to another, whether it is between husband and wife or parent and child. It is an instance of a contact not between skin and skin but between soul and soul—that is what makes it spiritual rather than sensual. The caress, therefore, seeks what cannot be touched. It seeks what lies at the heart of the home, and it reveals what lives in the heart of the family. For without the loving caress, neither home nor family can come into being.

Thus the *Odyssey* culminates in a husband's caress of his wife, and it ends with his embrace of his father. His return to his family includes a return both to the one with whom he brings life into the world and to one who lies at the origin of his life. Returned to both, Odysseus returns to a responsibility for life, which means: He returns to the family.

The threat to the family, however, comes not only from without, as in the tale of Odysseus, but also from within. This brings us to the next work we shall consider.

The Undermining of a Family: Shakespeare's *King Lear*

King Lear is a drama about the premature collapse and failed recovery of a monarch's household. While Homer's epic generally unfolds in the external geography of adventure, Shakespeare's play focuses more on the internal struggle of a soul trying to regain a native ground that has crumbled out from under him. But what exactly threatens the home and family of the King and, indeed, brings them to ruin?

The home and family in this drama come to ruin as the result of a fundamental confusion about nature and natural law, where natural law may be understood much as Thomas Aquinas understands it. Natural law, he explains in the *Summa Theologiae*, is "the participation in eternal law by rational creatures," and eternal law is defined as "the rational governance of everything on the part of God." The idea here is that God operates by design and that, since they bear the image of divine being, human beings have a responsibility to become part of that design. The rational governance of Providence implies an ordering of the world with the aim of pursuing the Good, that is, with the aim of attesting to what is most precious in life. Natural law, therefore, establishes a bond between the human being and divine being; it summons humanity to take up a path that would nurture and sanctify life, as God sanctifies life when He pronounces it to be "very good." Inasmuch as the relation between the holy and the human finds its first expression in the home and family, the life that unfolds in this realm bears witness to a natural law expressive of a sacred aim in life.

King Lear's confusion, then, is a fundamental confusion about the life that unfolds in the home, and it is revealed in his relation to the surviving members of his family, his daughters Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia. In the play's opening scene Lear does not offer his daughters a loving embrace expressive of a higher relation, according to the family bond determined by natural law. Instead, he arranges a business transaction, whereby he tries to purchase their words of affection by offering them portions of his wealth. Two of his daughters, Regan and Goneril, are eager to exploit this confusion that undermines the family: They exchange the testimony to life as determined by natural law for lifeless property. And so the seeds of death are sown.

The bond of love that is established by natural law to sustain the family, on the other hand, is precisely what Cordelia invokes when she declares to her father,

I love your majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less. (I.i)

It is not that Cordelia knows her place, but rather that she knows what is placed on high. Inclined toward a higher responsibility, she obeys the commandment of natural law, and not the whim of the King. But Lear insists upon the false authority of his own whims: Rejecting Cordelia's simple affirmation of her bond, he refuses what natural law commands. Refusing the commandment of natural law, he loses his relation to the eternal law that sustains the home and sanctifies the family. And so he is left homeless, turned over to the merciless power of the elements as exemplified by the storms in the fields. There he has no dwelling place, for there he is exiled from the truth of natural law.

Usurping the authority of natural law, Lear loses his identity both as the king of a realm and as the father of a family. Here we realize that the task with which natural law confronts us is not simply to follow some rule, but to be who we are. And who we are is defined by the eternal truth that sanctifies the family. Thus, as soon as Lear violates his family by casting out Cordelia, his daughter Regan notes that “he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (I.i). For he knows himself only by the power of manipulation, and not by the truth of family relation. Once he becomes powerless in the face of his daughters’ deception, Lear himself cries out, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (I.iv). He does not know himself because he does not know himself as a father, and he is a father before he is a king. To know himself as a father would be to know the natural law that binds him to his daughters in truth, and not through power.

Therefore, as we recall, Cordelia alone speaks the truth, for she alone knows the bond of nature that ties her to her father and, through her father, to a higher truth. Hence, it is she, says Shakespeare,

Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to. (IV.vi)

Cordelia works this redemption by restoring to Lear the relation between father and child—and with it the higher relation—that her sisters have undone. But this undoing was also Lear’s doing. Like most of those who exchange the truth of natural law for the power of human arrogance, he reaps what he has sown. The man who had understood himself only in terms of the power he could wield is overpowered and eventually crushed by the two daughters who would wrench power away from him.

The corruption of nature and the destruction of the family exemplified by Regan and Goneril manifests itself not only in their treatment of their father, but also in the violence that they bring down upon Gloucester by blinding him. The central figure in the play’s subplot, he is a father who is betrayed by his child Edmond and who mistakenly suspects his son Edgar of betrayal. Like Regan and Goneril, it is the bastard son Edmond who is the “unnatural villain” (I.ii), as Gloucester states it, and whose villainy includes the betrayal not only of his father, but also of Cornwall and Albany, the husbands of Regan and Goneril, respectively. For part of his power play involves making promises to take up with each of these wives who are Lear’s daughters. And, having betrayed their father, they are all too willing to betray their husbands and chase after Edmond.

Thus, the violation of the relation between parent and child entails the violation of the relation between husband and wife: The family is assaulted at every turn by those who would be a law unto themselves in a usurpation of natural law. And so when Albany suspects his wife’s treachery, he says to her,

O Goneril,
You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
Blows in your face. I fear your disposition:
That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself. (IV.ii)

That nature which contemns its origin—the child who dishonors her father—is a perverted nature that despises the family. Despising this origin of humanity, such a nature has nothing to limit its contempt for humanity. Goneril, then, divorces herself from all the limitations of natural law, which, as we have seen, is our link to the eternal law that sanctifies the family and all of humanity. Thus divorced from the family, Goneril is cut off from the

origin of all that is holy in human life and ends by murdering her two sisters. And the murder of Cordelia, of course, results in the death of her father Lear.

Set in a time that came long before Shakespeare's time, this play continues to speak to us in our own time. As a commentary on our own humanity, it sheds light on the ways in which we, too, stand by and tolerate the assault on the family. It tells us, for example, something about the sickness of a society that hides away its parents to die in "homes" that are the antithesis of a home and that leaves the care of its children to people who are not their parents. It reveals to us a connection between murder and adultery, between the hand that steals, the mouth that lies, and the eye that covets. For all of these things belong to a nature that contemns its origin and therefore has nothing but contempt for the family. All of them result from the undermining of the natural law that lies at the center of the home and that links the life of the family to the life of the eternal.

In these last five transgressions I have mentioned you will recognize the second five of the Ten Commandments. Here we may recall an ancient Jewish teaching, according to which the Ten Commandments were written on two tablets in order to designate two realms of relation. The first five commandments pertain to the relation of *adam la Makom*, or the human relation to the divine, and the second five pertain to the relation of *adam l'adam*, or the human relation to other human beings. What is of interest to the concern at hand is this: The commandment to honor mother and father belongs to the first category. Which means: The integrity of the family belongs to the integrity of the divine. Holding to the sanctity of the family, therefore, is prior to the sanctification of all other realms of human relation. Once Lear's daughters violate the family and destroy the home, there is no crime that they cannot commit. And justify.

Thus, the truth that comes to us through *King Lear* arises in an antiquity that long precedes it and lives in a modernity that far exceeds it. Truly among the permanent things, this truth finds another expression in a literary masterpiece that appears nearly three centuries after Shakespeare's play. Which brings us to the third work to be considered.

Families Lost and Found: Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Tolstoy's masterful novel *Anna Karenina* has found its way into the popular culture through various film versions, including one starring Christopher Reeve that was made for television. Generally speaking, the popular view of the novel that has resulted from these films is that it is the tale of an exciting but tragic love affair between a frustrated housewife and a dashing young aristocrat. Like many popular conceptions, however, this is a misconception. Tolstoy's aim in his portrayal of the adulterous love affair is to expose the moral corruption that leads to the dissolution of the family. And he makes this point by contrasting Anna's love affair with Levin's marriage.

A key to the contrast that Tolstoy sets up is the figure of the child; indeed, as we have noted, it is with the appearance of a child that a family comes into being. Should anyone suppose that Anna's affair with Vronsky is exciting and wonderful, we have only to recall Tolstoy's account of how this indulgence devastates her son Seryozha. He is described as "the compass which showed [his mother and her lover] the degree of their divergence from what they knew was right, but did not want to see." It is not as a judge, however, that Seryozha reveals to them their divergence from what is right. Rather, it is as a victim. Because he is a child, he represents a precious but fragile possibility for life; because he is a child, he embodies the meaning and direction that open up a future in which some redemption from a life void of meaning may be sought. Hence, the child is the core of home and family. And the child is just the one who is betrayed in Anna's illicit love affair.

"I love two beings only," says Anna of Seryozha and her lover Vronsky, "but the one excludes the other." And we know which one she chooses. After she has left her family, one of Seryozha's "favorite occupations," says Tolstoy, "was keeping a lookout for his mother during his walks." But she is almost never to be seen. Once she has a child by Vronsky, in fact, we are told that "the separation from her son...did not trouble her," since she had grown so attached to the daughter she had by Vronsky "that she rarely thought of her son." And yet the declaration of her love for "two beings only" was made long after the birth of her daughter. This attachment too, therefore, is soon eclipsed by her preoccupation with Vronsky's love for her and with a personal happiness that is forever longed for but never realized.

Why is it never realized? Because in truth Anna loves no being other than the counterfeit being she has fashioned by making herself her own heroine in a romance whose outcome is determined from the start. Living with her lover in a house that is not a home and in an arrangement that is inimical to marriage, she exchanges a family life for the illusion of a love life. To her, happiness is *my* happiness, and not the happiness of her family. Thus, becoming a sign only of herself, and not of the significance of the other human being, Anna is drained of all significance. Like Narcissus at the pool, she gazes into the mirror of her self-styled fairy tale until, as Tolstoy says, she no longer recognizes herself. For she has lost the image of wife and mother that would be the basis of such recognition. The only action that remains for her to establish some significance in life is to take her own life. This she does without a thought for the children who would be orphaned by her action.

What is missing from Anna's love for Vronsky is precisely the love that forms the basis of the family, which is a love for the other person expressive of a higher relation. It is the love for the holy, as it is evinced by the love between husband and wife, the love that puts the holy into holy matrimony. Only when marriage rests on such a foundation can a family come into being. In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy illustrates this point through the tale of Levin, which is the tale of a movement into life that runs counter to the story of the title character.

Modeled after the author himself, Levin is a man who is engaged in a constant struggle for meaning in life. And it is through the pursuit of family life that meaning in life finally opens up to him. In contrast to Anna, who sets up a household with a man to whom she is not married, Levin enters into marriage with Kitty under the auspices of the Church. Despite his religious skepticism at the time, he embraces the prayers said at his wedding. When, for example, he hears the words "Give unto them perfect love, peace and help, O Lord," he is struck by them, thinking, "How did they know that it is help, yes, help, that one needs?" And when he hears the priest say, "Who unitest them that were separated and who hast ordained for them an insoluble union in love," he realizes, "How profound those words are and how they fit with what one feels at this moment!" Thus, he sees that the words addressed to One who is above consecrate the marriage between two here below.

Levin continues to engage in a struggle for life's meaning in the face of death even after he is married. But, "thanks to his wife's presence," says Tolstoy, this struggle "did not drive him to despair: in spite of death he felt the need for living and loving." For his wife's presence signifies the presence of the sacred in his life, as it was invoked on the occasion of his marriage. Unlike Anna, who sought to be loved by Vronsky outside of marriage, Levin seeks to offer his love to the wife he has taken in holy matrimony, and that is what sustains him in life. Knowing his wife, he comes to know something of life's origin; moving toward life's origin, he moves toward a meaning in life that is stronger than death.

Through this love that links him to the origin of life, he joins with his wife to bear life into the world. Here too, of course, the figure of the child is crucial to the condition of the home and family. Contrary to Anna's disregard for her children, Levin sees in the birth of his child a revelation of something beyond the human. And so we read, "The birth of a son, which they promised him, but which he still could not believe in—so extraordinary did it seem—appeared to him on the one hand such an immense and therefore impossible happiness, and on the other hand such a mysterious event that the assumed knowledge of what was going to happen and, as a result of it, preparations as for something ordinary, something human beings themselves were responsible for, seemed scandalous and degrading to him." Thus, upon the birth of his child—if only for a moment—his skepticism gives way to a deeper vision, to a higher vision, and a prayer comes to his lips in spite of himself, as though the prayer had a life of its own. All his doubts, says Tolstoy, "fell away, like dust, from his soul. To whom else was he to appeal, if not to Him in whose hands he felt himself, his soul, and his love to be?" The vessel of this revelation? A newborn babe.

This vision of a mystery that transcends the handiwork of humanity is precisely a vision of the family. The vision unfolds as the family emerges in a place where there had been two but there are now three. And it is the vision of the family that makes it possible for Levin to receive the meaning in life that he has sought all along, a meaning that is as essential to the soul as bread is to the body. Near the end of the novel he meets a peasant who offers him the key to what he had struggled for, expressed in deceptively simple terms: Live for God, and not for yourself. At first these words seem so simple to Levin as to be meaningless. But then he thinks to himself, "Well? Did I not understand those meaningless words?" And he answers himself, "No, I understood them just as he understands them: I understood them perfectly and better than I understand anything in life, and I have never in my life doubted it or could doubt it."

And yet he does not fully grasp the truth of the peasant's words until he sees his wife and son nearly killed by a bolt of lightning. Seeing their lives threatened, he sees what his own life is for. What does it mean to live for God and not for yourself? It means living for your family and thereby creating a home through which the holy may enter life and instill it with meaning. As God breathed life into the first human being, the family breathes life into all humanity. Only where such a breath is drawn can dwelling happen. And only where dwelling happens do we approach a realm called home.

Concluding Thoughts

While the literary masterpieces we have considered are varied in their approach to home and family, they do have a few things in common. In all three cases, for example, the assault on home and family entails a violation of holy matrimony. Recall, for example, the suitors who invade the home of Odysseus, Edmond's designs on Regan and Goneril, and Anna Karenina's love affair. And we find that when the holiness of marriage is threatened, the holiness of human life is compromised: The suitors plot to kill Telemachus, Goneril plans the murder of Cordelia, and Anna ends by killing herself.

In all three cases, moreover, the issue of a wife's fidelity is directly tied to the presence of the mother. Because Penelope remains faithful to Odysseus, she remains a mother to Telemachus; therefore, it is thanks to her that Odysseus has a home and family to return to. Anna Karenina cannot take up with Vronsky without abandoning her child Seryozha; in contrast to her betrayal we have Kitty's faithfulness to Levin, which ultimately makes it possible for Levin to realize what is most dear in life. And in Shakespeare's play the mother is absent altogether because the devotion of a wife to a husband is altogether absent; there

the absence of the mother is symbolically manifested in Lear's alienation from the earth itself when he is turned over to the chaos of the stark elements.

Similarly, all three works address the role of the father as a teacher and a witness. Odysseus is able to restore the integrity of his home, which includes a return to his own father, because he has attested to the higher relation that home and family signify. When, as in the case of Lear, that testimony is absent, the home and family collapse; Lear's tragedy is that by the time he realizes who he is as a father, the consequences of his absence as a father are already in place. And in Tolstoy's novel we find that only when Levin becomes a father does there open up for him an avenue to the Most High enabling him to recognize his responsibility for what is most sacred here below.

All three of these masterpieces also bear witness to the importance of the child to the sanctity of home and family and to the meaning of life itself. Before he relates the trials of Odysseus, for example, Homer establishes the position of Telemachus as the son of Odysseus and as the heir to his wisdom. If Penelope makes it possible for Odysseus to return to a home established in the past, Telemachus receives a legacy that posits a future necessary to the family. In the case of Lear, the presence or absence of the child parallels the presence or absence of his own identity. Lear is who he is—and therefore might become more than he is—only through his relation to Cordelia. In *Anna Karenina*, we recall, Anna's child reveals to her a moral path that she is summoned to follow, and Levin's child shows him the way to salvation. Indeed, in all three of these works the child bears a salvific significance.

What does all of this tell us about our own condition and the salvation that we are all in need of? In a word, it tells us that if we are not mothers, nothing has value; if we are not fathers, we ourselves are nothing; and if we have no children, everything is meaningless. And yet, as never before, the mother, father, and child are under massive assault in our society. As in the literary works we have considered, that assault begins with an assault on holy matrimony, which is an assault on the holy itself. Divorce rates, for instance, are staggering, and they are higher among people who live together before they get married than among those who do not. Why? Because those who live together out of wedlock have no regard for the sanctity of marriage.

Premarital and extramarital sex, moreover, is not only tolerated—it is romanticized and is therefore encouraged. Sex, I have been told, is a way of “getting to know someone.” No longer, then, is the sexual relation understood to be an expression of a higher relation, whereby a husband and wife join with the Creator to bring life into the world. Indeed, the last thing that most people want when they engage in sex is to become a mother or a father. Therefore, the question raised in the sexual relation is not “How do I express my devotion to God through this relation to another human being?” but rather “Am I protected?” And yet the more we are concerned with this protection, the more we plunge into ruin.

Because the sexual relation is central to bearing life into the world, our views on sex are directly tied to the value we place on human life. And as sex becomes more casual, motherhood and fatherhood become more corrupt. Instead of viewing motherhood as a blessing, we view abortion as a right. Women who have babies and decide to be mothers by staying home with their children are taken to be either deprived or deficient and are made to feel that they have to apologize for some transgression. As for fathers, they are held to no standards at all. Many abandon their families altogether, and when fathers are absent communities collapse into a combination of lotus eaters and Cyclopians—those among whom the life of the other human being means nothing.

I am not speaking only of city neighborhoods where most households are headed by single mothers. No, the entire land has taken on the aspect of the Land of the Lotus Eaters. There is no evidence more convincing or more terrible to support this than the fact that the most common form of death among children between 15 and 19 years of age is the death related to drugs and alcohol. This has come to be the case not because our children have failed to learn what we teach them, but because they have learned all too well and have followed our teachings to their logical conclusions. These are the teachings that regard the family as a social unit, and not as a center of life's sanctity; that regard the ego as the center of the universe, and not as the seat of responsibility to and for the other human being; and that take morality to be a cultural curiosity, and not a means of expressing our relation to the God who summons us to be moral.

As in the case of Odysseus, violence follows in the wake of the lotus. And, of course, violence in the streets finds its way into the home. It goes by the scandalous name of "domestic violence." Domestic violence is not the cause of the breakdown of the family; it is the result of that breakdown. For domestic violence is the outcome of a loss of the sacred in life, and the family is the primary ground for the manifestation of what is sacred. A man who understands his relation to his wife to be an expression of a relation to the Most High is far less likely to beat her than a man who has no such understanding. A father who sees that his children are a blessing from God and the basis of all there is to hold dear is far less likely to abuse them than one who has no such insight.

But we shall remain blind to this understanding and insight as long as we send women into wars, give the nod to abortions on demand, grant divorces without grounds, romanticize adultery, and accord so-called homosexual marriage the same status as a marriage that can bring children into the world. Much more than the signs of changing times, these are the signs of the loss of meaning; much more than the manifestation of cultural evolution, they are a manifestation of cultural collapse. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "We have bartered holiness for convenience, loyalty for success, wisdom for information, prayers for sermons, tradition for fashion." Which amounts to saying: We have traded the home for the void and the family for the abyss.

Cultural restoration not only begins at home, as Russell Kirk has pointed out; it begins with the restoration of the home and of the family that constitutes the home. If home and family are indeed among the permanent things, as the literature we have discussed indicates, they require a permanent vigilance. For the permanent things are the most precious things. And nothing is more fragile than what is most precious.