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10-10-1974

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Developing Personal Relationships

By JOSEPH J. BATTISTONE

A GENERATION AGO it was not unusual to know personally your mailman, milkman, egg man, bread man, grocery clerk, your next door neighbor, and most of the people on your street. Friendships—and feuds—were long lasting. When someone moved out of the neighborhood, it was quite an ordeal. Everyone knew about it. And they took time to say good-by.

Today, all this has changed. To say this does not mean, of course, that the “good old days” were free of problems or that the present is void of meaning, but to recognize the fact that relationships between individuals and groups have been affected by advances in science and technology. Let’s be honest. Do you know the name of the attendant who services your car? Would you recognize the person who delivers your mail if you saw him in the supermarket? Do you know the people who make the bread you eat? If you are able to answer Yes to these questions, you are extraordinary.

For many of us, daily contacts with individuals take place on an impersonal basis. Few could cash a check at the supermarket without the clerk’s asking for identification. Our age, moreover, is the age of the credit card. Names give way to numbers as communities are governed more and more by computers.

It would be wrong, however, to blame science and technology for our dilemma. If life has become impersonal it is not because of the mass production, mass transportation, and mass communication systems. The real culprits are not our labor-saving devices, time-saving techniques, and back-saving machines. For these inventions were designed to take the drudgery out of life and to

provide us with leisure to enjoy life. Hence, sporadic protests against “the system” or “the establishment” are futile. To identify the real source of our problem we must look beyond science and technology. Before condemning the system we need to examine ourselves.

Isn’t it strange that with all the modern conveniences we enjoy, we are as busy today as we ever have been? Is it possible that we choose to be busy at times to escape from personal responsibilities? “I don’t want to get personally involved,” an observer says after witnessing a crime. “You take things too personally,” counsels a friend in an effort to console one in despair. “Let’s not get personal about this,” we say, in an attempt to avoid an argument.

What do people mean by these statements? Without denying other concerns, it is safe to say that they express a desire to keep relationships on a casual basis. Well, it may be asked, is there any harm in maintaining casual relationships? In fact, is it not essential to our well-being to relate to persons in general in a casual way?

Most persons, to be sure, relate to one another in a casual way, and do so without apology. For there is no apparent harm done. And it cannot be denied that most persons feel compelled to select some individuals with whom they relate on a more personal basis.

I suggest that our concern to relate to persons casually grows out of a desire for privacy. So long as we are able to keep individuals at a distance we are able to keep intact the image of ourselves we wish to project. We camouflage ourselves by the roles we play, by the titles we assume, and even by our own choice of words. The greeting “Good morning. How are you today?” is not personal because few will pause long enough to converse. Hence, when someone greets us this way we are not to assume that he is personally

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interested in our well-being. The greeting is at best a polite gesture.

The story is told of a minister who would greet his congregation after the sermon with the question, "How are you today?" One parishioner decided to put his pastor to the test. When asked the question, he replied with a broad smile on his face, "I feel terrible." "I'm glad to hear that," the pastor replied. Of course, the minister didn't hear the comment. He was too busy greeting his congregation. And that was precisely what the parishioner anticipated. The pastor's greeting was only a casual gesture of friendship. It was not to be taken too personally.

So long as we are able to move at a self-appointed pace we can maintain our camouflage and preserve our privacy. But then an emergency occurs! Something happens that we hadn't anticipated. And emergencies have the uncanny knack of stripping away our camouflage. In such situations we discover ourselves as we really are. And others, as well, see us in this light.

So we find ourselves changing opinions we've held about individuals. "I've always thought him to be weak and insignificant," we say, "but in an emergency he proved otherwise." Or, "I always thought he was the kind of person who could step into a situation and immediately take command, but in an emergency he went to pieces."

Emergencies have a way of destroying the very privacy we seek to maintain through casual relationships. They also reveal a serious deficiency. In times of crisis we seldom receive help or comfort from casual acquaintances. People prefer not to get involved. For involvement is costly in time and emotional energy. In a casual relationship a person through self-conditioning can express sympathy while being emotionally detached, and, at the same time, feel safe and secure behind such a camouflage.

But this is the tragedy of life today. These sympathetic gestures have little healing virtue. For they fail to penetrate deeply into the wounds of the afflicted. In fact, they may even deepen the wounds. Sympathetic gestures are often ways of atoning for the guilt persons experience because of their emotional detachment. Because they believe their words of sympathy help those in need, they feel relieved. Often they them-

selves are the only beneficiaries of their gestures.

Casual relationships are attractive to us because in such relationships not much is expected. Because the expectations are not great we feel protected. For example, consider the advertisements appealing for aid to the war-torn and famine-stricken inhabitants of Vietnam and Africa. So long as I am able to view the oppressed and afflicted in a casual and somewhat impersonal way I will be able to exercise self-restraint. But should I become personally involved with hungry African babies or emotionally troubled by whimpering Vietnamese children it will be more difficult for me to withhold offerings to these depressed persons.

At times parents choose to relate to their children behind camouflages. "We love you all alike," they say, in an attempt to remove cause for suspicion or jealousy. Without denying their good intentions or the sincerity of their words, we can question the nature of the relationship.

Love is not some commodity we can purchase at the supermarket and distribute in mass-production style. Love is deeply personal. One of the most personal expressions in the English language is "I love you." It denotes a deep, abiding interest that one has for another. This interest will vary from individual to individual but it will never lack depth or permanency.

This is why a love relationship can never be casual. It is based on something more substantial than sheer physical attraction. And because it is, it is able to weather the storms of life that disfigure individuals. Parents who love their children are naturally biased toward them. Regardless of what their friends may think and say, to them their children are beautiful. And this is so not because love is blind but because love perceives more deeply. It penetrates into the very heart of the other and sees a person who needs, desires, appreciates, and responds to acceptance and affection.

Love not only has depth, it has permanent significance as well. A love relationship is not only a commitment to life but also for life. This is so because love and life are inseparable. Wherever there is love there is life and vice versa. If there were no love, life itself would end. So long as love remains, then, there is hope for life and hope in life as well.

Love makes and keeps life personal. But this costs. Love cannot be purchased at bargain prices. It costs us dearly. For in loving we give ourselves to another completely. There are no reservations. Love does not calculate the costs in order to seek alternatives but spends generously and does so unconsciously. This is so because love enables us to discern and preserve ultimate values. Parents of a child dying with leukemia will sacrifice whatever wealth they have accumulated and more in a desperate attempt to purchase the services and treatment that might save his life. It is not difficult to be moved in a personal way when we witness such a demonstration of love.

Love is the indispensable ingredient in the formula of personal relationships. In loving one another we relate to one another in a personal way because in loving we give ourselves and in return receive another, and as a result are spiritually enriched. There is nothing casual or impersonal about such a relationship. Nor is it shallow or transitory.

Perhaps this is why our salvation is described in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For such a relationship is deep and abiding. It awakens in us God's love. And out of such an awakening we are able to develop personal relationships that have depth and permanent significance. In this way we experience eternal life as something God has made available for us today in a personal way. □

Thank You, Lord, for Love

By ANN ELISE BURKE

Lord, just now I finished talking
with my friend.
Two thousand miles apart, and
in seconds
we could talk as if face to face.
My gentle thanks to You
and Mr. Bell,
who made this moment possible,
as the peacefulness of friendship
floats across the miles
that separate.

Thank You, Lord,
for phones,
for friends;
but most of all
for love that can melt miles
into nothing.