



MONDAY'S MEAL

SUSTAINABLE NOURISHMENT FOR THE LONG DISTANCE RUN

Five Kids At Peace

by Elisabeth Elliot

Monday's Meal is a service of The Oaks Classical and Christian Academy.

Each meal is selected specifically to feed and nourish parents for the long distance run. If you found it helpful, consider passing it along.

"...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds..."
Hebrews 10:24

The house was large, white, set well back from the street, and surrounded with lawns, gardens and beautiful big trees—the sort of place that could easily keep a full-time gardener busy. It was nearly suppertime of an autumn afternoon, and as my hostess, who had met me at the airport, took me through the side door and into the kitchen, I could smell beef stew and wood smoke, just the sort of things I wanted to smell in a place like that. We went through a large hall with a beautiful staircase and into a small sitting room where a fire burned and three boys were sprawled prone on the floor, two of them playing a game, one reading.

"Boys, I want you to meet Mrs. Leitch."

All three were on their feet at once, coming toward me to shake hands. Not only were they not reluctant or surly, they acted as though they were sincerely glad to see me.

After I was shown my room I joined Arlita, my hostess, in the kitchen to help with supper. She set about making biscuits while I cut up apples for Waldorf salad. A few minutes before supper was ready a couple of the boys appeared and in no time had set the table, poured the milk, carried in the food.

The dining room had an elegant fireplace and mantelpiece, a bay window filled with plants, and an enormous round cherry table. Joe, who is a doctor, sat opposite the fireplace with his wife at his side. I sat across from them and between us the four sons and one daughter, ages nine to sixteen. We all clasped hands for grace. Conversation ranged from schoolwork, the church, the neighbors, the old house a few blocks away where I used to live, to mathematics and the meaning of a passage of Scripture. All participated. All also took it upon themselves to see to the comfort of their guest, passing me the biscuits, the jam, the salt, asking if I'd have another bowl of stew, filling my water glass. It seemed that each child understood that he was on the entertainment committee. The fact that I was a contemporary of their parents did not absolve them of gracious responsibility. They were even eager to look after me, eager to hear what I had to say.

The dining room doesn't have an observation window with one-way glass to which I can take certain parents I can think of to observe this model family, seated around the cherry table, alert yet relaxed, disciplined yet hilarious, attentive yet at ease. And of course the family would object very strenuously to anyone's holding them up as a model. Yet they are. All families, in the last analysis, are models—of something. Some of cosmos, that wonderful Greek word which signifies order and arrangement. Some of chaos, its opposite—disorder and confusion.

At the end of the meal everybody sang. I can't remember what gospel songs they sang, but I remember the hearty way they all joined. Then Joe read the Bible. They talked about what it meant. The youngest son was asked first to explain what he thought it was all about and was then challenged, corrected and encouraged by siblings and parents. Joe asked for prayer requests and each child thought of somebody he wanted prayed for--a schoolmate who seemed hungry to know God, a Jewish lady whose husband had died, a kid on drugs. When the prayers were finished Joe and Arlita and I went to the sitting room to talk by the fire. All was quiet. I was dimly aware of movement in the other rooms--the table being cleared, dishes washed. Later I heard a piano and a flute. People were practicing, homework was undoubtedly being done, but all of it without strife, without one interruption to the parents who, so far as I noticed, had issued no instructions to anybody when we got up from the table.

Later in the evening I noted the stillness.

"Are the kids in bed?" I asked.

"What time is it?" Arlita said.

"10:45."

"Then they're in bed. Usually we say goodnight to them, but occasionally when we have company they don't come down."

This almost took my breath away. I've visited in a good many homes where the going-to-bed routine takes the better part of the evening, with wheedling, threats, pleas, prolonged negotiations and eventual capitulation. How, I wanted to know, do you do it? Such order, such peace, such fun as everyone seemed to have, and such smooth running of oiled wheels. I grew up in a family where the same things could have been said, but that was another generation, another day. Walking still occurred to people as a possibility if they had to get somewhere, and it was still acceptable simply to sit on the porch some evenings and not go anywhere. So how, in this day and age, did Joe and Arlita do it?

They looked at each other as though the question had not arisen before. Arlita smiled.

"Well . . ." she hesitated, trying to think how they did it. "I'm sure we did just what you did. We decided how we wanted it to be and then we did it that way. Isn't that right, Joe?"

"That's right. In fact, we decided before the children were born how we wanted things to be. The going-to-bed business, for example. I don't want to hate my kids, and if I had them in my hair all evening, if I had to fight to get them down and fight to get them up again in the morning, I'd hate them. So after they've reached eight or nine years of age we don't tell them when they have to go to bed. We tell them when they have to be at the breakfast table. We give them each an alarm clock, and if they know they have to be washed, dressed, combed, in their right minds and in their places at 7:30, they soon figure out for themselves when to go to bed and when to get up."

It worked. Next morning, which was Saturday, the children were downstairs to do their appointed tasks. At 7:30 we sat down to sausage, fried apples, scrambled eggs, coffee cake, orange juice and coffee. Arlita had not cooked the breakfast, the kids had. They had organized things so that the whole job was done in a quarter of an hour or so. The table was set, the food on it, hot and appetizing, on time.

Does the system ever break down? I wanted to know. There are lapses, Joe and

Arlita said, and privileges sometimes have to be withdrawn, but there's a lot of camaraderie in doing the jobs, and everybody likes to see it work. I had never seen a more beautifully ordered home, and neither had I ever seen a better-adjusted, more likable and outgoing bunch of kids. There must be a connection.

A house the size of theirs needs a lot of maintenance. Nobody comes in to cook, clean or garden. The whole family works. A list of special jobs is posted every so often--woodcutting, window washing, floor waxing, the sort of jobs that aren't done every week--and the children sign up for whatever they're willing to tackle. Then each child makes out a three-by-five card for each job and puts down the time he spent at it. The card is then submitted to a parent who inspects the finished task and signs the card if he approves the quality of the work. If he does not sign it, the child does the job over on his own time. Cards are turned in at the end of the month and the children are paid the going rate. With the money he earns, each buys his own clothes, except for the youngest, who puts half his money in the bank against the day when he too must take the responsibility for buying clothes.

"We're all working for each other this way," Joe said, "each taking responsibility as he's able. They're not paid, of course, for daily jobs like bedmaking and table setting and dishwashing. But last month we paid for 125 hours of 'special' jobs."

Stravinsky in his *Poetics of Music* refers to "the anguish into which an unrestricted freedom plunges me." Unrestricted freedom--anguish. Their opposites, discipline and serenity, characterized the home I've described. But it took thought. It took vision. It took courage to lay the burden on the children, strength to support them in it, humility to submit to the rule of life, and an ear tuned to a different drummer from the one the world hears.