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Home Matters

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Our work in the home matters. It matters enormously to the well-being of individuals and families. It matters to communities, society, and the economy. And it matters to the environment. Through the work we do in the home, we give our children love, security and values. By raising loving, secure and responsible children, we sustain our communities and society and give our communities and society meaning and value. In nurturing our families, moreover, we sustain the economy which relies heavily on the work performed in the home. The work we do in the home, finally, affects the environment – for good or ill – in a myriad ways through the food we buy, the cleaning products we use, etc, etc, as well as the attitudes and behaviours we teach our children. There are, then, many good reasons to devote serious thought to the work we do in the home and to invest time and effort in it!

And, yes – obviously – what we do in the home is work, work which carries heavy responsibilities and confronts us with significant challenges and therefore requires special knowledge and skills. It is also work which allows us fantastic independence (which is why I love it). It is not, however, particularly valued work. Where does the undervaluing of the work in the home come from? For one, what the work in the home achieves is not immediately or easily measurable. Output, profits, and exam scores do not go up directly as a result of the work we do in the home. The work in the home is a *long-term* investment in the development of our children, the physical and mental health of our families, and the sustainability of our communities, society, the economy, and the environment. The work in the home, moreover, is unpaid and that presents not only a financial problem for many families but also a cause of low self-esteem for many who are engaged in the work of the home as society tends to measure our worth not by the quality of our home life but by our income. People can, finally, only value what they know. And the very people who form opinions through the media as well as those who determine government policy on the family have, on the whole, given the work in the home a miss. So they simply don't know what it is they are denigrating or legislating against. (*cf. Christine Odone of the Centre for Policy Studies on Radio 2 recently; psychologist Melanie Gill's anecdote about the woman minister in a meeting when presented with evidence against early years institutionalized childcare – 'oops'...*). But the tide is turning, as research increasingly points to the importance of the home and the work that goes on there and more and more men and women speak up in support of the home. (see HRF website! www.homerenaisancefoundation.org).

So, what does our work in the home involve? In the home, we have to manage ourselves. We have to manage time, money, and things. And we have to manage people. **Managing ourselves** is often the first great challenge confronting us, particularly if we are used to being managed, as it were, in paid employment. At home, we ourselves need to set our work agenda – we need to determine our long-term goals, medium-term objectives, and daily targets! No one does it for us. In addition, we have to persevere and stay motivated through set-backs and periods of exhaustion without the prospect of a pay-rise or a promotion to help us along (*for help with this, see chapter 5, 'Persevering', in Anna Melchior,*

Mothering: A Spiritual and Practical Approach (St Paul's: London, 2007). Setting our agenda involves deciding what our priorities are and what knowledge and skills we may need to acquire to meet them and how best to achieve our objectives on a day-to-day basis. You may want to improve the health of your family, for example, so you go and learn about nutrition and preparing nutritious meals. Or you may decide that your home could be more beautiful and look into learning about interior design and start making your own curtains.

Our management of time, money, and things flows from our agenda. If the environment and human and animal welfare are important to you, for example, you choose the most ethical produce and products available and use the clothes line rather than the dryer, cycle to the shops, and so forth. And if we all did that, we would bring about tremendous change for the better, both locally and globally! If a clean and tidy home is important to you, you spend more time and money on cleaning and tidying. You may prefer empty space to clutter and regularly get rid of items that are neither useful nor beautiful, or you may prefer to surround yourself with well-loved objects and keep adding to them. We are all different and our priorities are different so, naturally enough, our home-making differs and reflects our different personalities and interests.

Managing people is the most challenging aspect of our work in the home. It is a subtle business that takes place on many different levels, all at once. At home, **we provide our children with example**, a good example, hopefully. If they see you switching off lights, avoiding waste, and recycling, for instance, chances are they will do the same. If they see you cleaning the bathroom, they will, probably, try harder to keep it decent looking. If they are around while you are entertaining guests, they will learn from you about hospitality. And if they know that you are spending an hour every evening preparing the evening meal which you then all enjoy together, they will, almost certainly, come to appreciate good food. Children pick up a lot from our example. This is why I am a keen advocate of spending so-called quantity time with them (in addition to quality time, of course) – time, that is, in which we are available to our children but are not focusing on them. We communicate values as well as good habits to our children largely through the example we set during quantity time.

Not only do we provide our children with good example in the home, **we also – unless we are total martyrs to our families - involve our children in the work of the home.**

From age two or three, children can become actively involved in the work of the household. As long as their tasks match their skills and their sense and, once they are at school, their schedules, as well, they will thrive on participating in home-making. They will enjoy mastering challenges (initially with your help) and they will enjoy growing in independence as you, eventually, leave them to get on with jobs by themselves. Through their participation in housework, children develop a sense of responsibility and concern for the well-being of others. They enjoy contributing to what matters most to them – their family life – and begin to understand the home as a joint project in which they are active participants rather than mere consumers of services provided by their parents. Getting our children to contribute to home-making is not easy, but the earlier you start, the more sensitive to their particular interests and abilities you are, and the more consistent you are in what you ask of them, the likelier you will succeed. And then, oh joy, you can get things done in the home without doing them yourself in the knowledge, moreover, that your children are learning a lot in the process! (+ *lots more tips for involving children in housework in Chapter 5 of Anna Melchior's, Mothering: A Spiritual and Practical Approach* (St Paul's: London, 2007) + *plenty on managing yourself, time, money, and things*)

Our work in the home, then, helps our children to develop good habits and teaches them values as well as a sense of responsibility, concern for others, and increasing independence. More fundamentally still, however, **our work in the home communicates love and security to our children**. By being there for our children - looking after them, playing with them, working with them, cooking for them, eating with them, talking with them – we let our children know that we love and value them and enjoy spending time with them. We let them know that we are interested in them and in what is going on in their lives and are there for them if they need us. This makes our children feel loved, valued, understood and appreciated and gives them a sense of security. It also renders them capable of empathy and of loving others (*cf. Melanie Gill's point – a generation of professionals incapable of empathy, consequences for law, medicine and politics*). It is the love we show our children through what we do in the home with them and for them that enables them to grow into emotionally well-balanced adults. As home makers, we make the home a place in which people can develop (*cf. Professor Julia Prats, 'Technical, Interpersonal and Personal Competences of Work', paper presented at the Home Renaissance Foundation International Seminar in Barcelona on 18 May 2009*). Schools cannot create emotionally secure and resilient children capable of loving and learning. It takes family life – time in the home – to teach children these immeasurable and immeasurably important fundamentals. Research has shown that the first three years of a child's development are particularly crucial in this respect (*see, for example, Sue Gerhardt's book, Why love matters* Routledge, London, 2004 *and the work by Christa Meves, the German psychologist*). But our children never stop needing our love, of course, and loving them always takes time (e.g., long drawn-out dinner table conversations during which everybody, quite naturally, gets a chance to share something with the others; our eldest catching me on my way to bed to talk about what worries her...).

Our work in the home involves nurturing and, when necessary, also healing. It involves nurturing and healing not only our children, moreover, but also our husbands and ourselves as well as the various relationships that make up our family. I was very pleased when I came across the following by a Zen Buddhist monk on community building. I was pleased because it explained to me where so much of my energy as a mother goes! 'We have to build a sangha [i.e., a community] that is happy, where communication is open. We have to take care of each person, staying aware of his pain, her difficulties, his aspirations, her fears and hopes in order to make him or her comfortable and happy. This requires time, energy, and concentration,' (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace*, Parallax Press: Berkeley, California, 1992, p.112). This is, at its deepest level, what our work in the home is about. And it is tremendously challenging and tremendously important work. In fact, humanity depends on us doing it well.

I conclude with a quote from *Mothering* (Anna Melchior, *Mothering: A Spiritual and Practical Approach* (St Paul's: London, 2007, p.27)

As a mother, you are the centre of the home, which is the base and refuge of the family. The home [...] is the place where the family come to rest and recharge and be reassured, whether after a morning at nursery or a trip abroad. In the home, [moreover] the family – without fear of rejection – learn and never stop learning what it means to be human: what it means to share their selves with others.