



Happy Valentine's Day!..... 1

Wits End Wisdom..... 3

Sugar Cube Igloo..... 5

Chocolate "Love" Fudge.....5

Happy Valentine's Day!

Even though it's still technically winter, spring is on its way in Provence. The city of Marseille has planted pansies in all of the community flower boxes, the trees are beginning to swell with buds, and the French blue sky has a distinctly "springy" cast to it. We are enjoying the fresh air and the flower markets. With Valentine's Day less than a week away the children are gearing up. Their usual production of paper hearts and little love notes for one another is in full swing and they are keeping their eyes peeled for foil covered chocolate hearts to add to their gifts. "Do they celebrate Valentine's Day here Mom?" asked Elisha, as we were trekking back up the hill from our trip to the *boulangerie*. Yes, they do... France's history is Christian and the Saints Valentine were Christian." I replied. "Oh good," he said, visibly relieved. After three months in Muslim Tunisia, celebrating both Thanksgiving and Christmas alone, he had resigned himself to a similar fate for our family celebration of Valentine's Day.

The Educational Value of Cooking With Children..... 6

A Woman and Her Theology..... 9



I find the origins of things interesting. I enjoy knowing where things came from and why, centuries later, we still observe certain things. Valentine's Day has an interesting history: It was originally a day set apart by the Catholic church to celebrate the two Italian martyrs named "Valentine." An observance that was done away with in Vatican II. There was no romantic link to these two men or their lives; it wasn't until the middle ages and the advent of "courtly love" among the royalty of Europe that there began to be a romantic connotation associated with Valentine's Day. No one knows exactly when, or how it began to be celebrated, but eventually an exchange of cards and love notes became traditional in England. This tradition migrated to the Americas with the settlers of the "New World" and the tradition has been passed from generation to generation, down hill to us. I think Valentine's Day is a great idea. I can't help but think that those two old martyrs would be happy to know that the day set aside to honor their memories has morphed into a day to celebrate love. After all, that is what the Christian life is all about: Love for Christ and our fellow man.

Then there is the commercialism. What St. Valentine's Day has become. I'm not necessarily a fan of all of that... it is hard not to feel like the whole "celebration" has been contrived by salesmen of various products seeking to lighten our wallets and replace the high calling of true love with a cheap plastic imitation in the form of fuzzy handcuffs and a feather duster packaged together with a big red bow. There is very little love to be found in the "seasonal" aisle of the local Wal-mart promising "25% off" real love in a silver gilt box...nothing could be quicker or easier, no more convenient way to show "how much you care." And if you have kids, you'd better put their blinders on before you head down the card aisle... not all of them represent a wholesome true love, now do they? If this is what "true love" has come to mean in our culture, no wonder the divorce rate hovers above 50%.



Now don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to conversation hearts or foil wrapped chocolates and a dozen roses makes me as happy as the next girl. My husband never forgets Valentine's Day and I'm far from suggesting a boycott just because the culture has got it all wrong. What I'm suggesting is a return to a celebration of real, authentic, holy love... the love between a husband and wife, for starters, which the culture has traded for "serial monogamy;" a cheap and tawdry imitation. The love between sisters, between good friends, between little chil-

dren who can't imagine loving anyone more than their very best friend, between fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, between Christ and the church. Let's celebrate THAT kind of love. The real, unconditional, "I'll walk through the fire with you right into eternity because I really LOVE YOU," kind of love." The love that none of us deserve.

My Mom and Dad were great at this. When we were kids every Valentine's Day we'd run downstairs to see little foil wrapped hearts taped to handmade construction paper cards that my Mom had created for us. Not a whole pile of candy. Not a big gift. Just a little reminder that we were loved just because we were theirs. My Dad never forgot flowers for my mom... usually the potted variety that would soon be out in the garden, just as soon as the Canadian snow melted. We'd have a special dinner that usually included a red velvet heart cake and that was it. Plain, simple, non-commercial, inexpensive, wholesome and loving to the very core. We were never made to feel like Valentine's Day was "their day" it was "our day" and all of our different loves were celebrated. It wasn't until I was quite a big girl that I realized the unhealthy slant toward "romantic love" that permeated the holiday.

I want my kids to grow up with a true and healthy perspective on love. I want them to feel the truth in 1 Cor. 14 where love is described as "patient, kind, not envying, not boastful, never rude, not self seeking, not easily angered, keeping no record of wrong and rejoicing in the truth, always protecting, always trusting, always hoping, always persevering and never failing." A love rarely found in this world. A love worth celebrating. A love found only in Christ and imperfectly reflected in those who love through him. A love their Daddy does a heroic job of lavishing on their Mama, and on them. It is this love that we'll celebrate with our pink paper hearts and shiny stickered, homespun Valentines in the south of France this year.

Wits End Wisdom

by Maria Boren

My good friend and mentor, Maria, wrote this five years ago. I found it this week and was reminded again of the blessing of an older woman in life to remind us of what really matters. I've reprinted it in honor of a very special milestone in Maria's life... last month she became a grandmother for the very first time! ~j

I have been thinking a lot lately about the mothers of young children that I know that have chosen a path or philosophy of life that is not the conventional one of the world. When you are knee deep in diapers or losing your mind because your conversations seemed to be consumed with directional and correctional statements; when you have lost sight of whom you think you are and miss whom you

thought you should be-I have a word for you. Hang in there. It is worth it to do what you are doing.

Much of the time you don't realize that what you are doing is the most important thing. You are entrusted with a precious and unique gift. That boy or girl who is running in circles, who is pushing that button, who has seemingly managed to wear you down to your last fiber of calm and has made you demonstrate something equivalent to a volcano erupting ...he is all yours. Our tendency is to look at our failures and all the things that aren't working, but I challenge you to change your perspective.

This child was designed by God and given to you-for God's purposes, for the working out of things in him and in you. Has it crossed your mind that the tenacity of your child is the same kind of purpose driven behavior that makes for great apostles like Paul? What about Miss act-first-think later...she has the Peter syndrome. And oh, your child the daydreamer filled with all the sensitivity and wonder and flowing words is like the disciple that Jesus loved...John. When you can see the uniqueness of your son or daughter and then look at yourself it should cause you to laugh at the sense of humor of the Creator because it is a pretty comical thing that He has done. Have you figured out how to laugh with your child? Are you finding the joy in situations? Are you learning together how "all things can work together for good?" Are you giving correction? Are you giving it lovingly? Are you giving it lovingly and consistently? Are you keeping a record of wrongs... yours or theirs? Is it making you frustrated and guilt ridden and your child the object of your self-improvement program. If this is you then you need to stop and look. Not inward or outward but upward!

You need to slow down and take a deep breath and look. Look at the Creator and the ones He has created, you and your child; totally and completely the work of the Master. Take these marvels, these gifts and ask the Lord to direct your steps in it. Follow His direction and follow it with His heart. He will not fail you. He will not give you any more than you are able to handle... or any less. He wants you and your child to have peace, joy, love, and all the fruits of a life lived in Him. Think about it. Love them and learn to enjoy this day and the time you are given. You cannot go back to fix it and you have no true idea of what tomorrow will hold . Walk circumspectly, redeeming the time, knowing that the days are evil and our adversary the devil is walking around seeking whom he can devour.

Sugar Cube Igloo

by Jess Montalvo

One last bit of winter fun to be had indoors... let's hope spring comes soon!

Materials:

Box of sugar cubes

2 egg whites

3 c. powdered sugar

(or a can of store bought frosting!)

Instructions from Jess:

"I loved doing these when I was a kid. All you need is a bag of sugar cubes and some frosting: Mix the two egg whites with the powdered sugar to make the frosting "glue"... or, if you prefer, just use a can of store bought frosting.

Use a knife (or a cake decorating tube with a small round tip) to spread the frosting in between the cubes to build the igloo.

Be creative... if the igloo doesn't come out perfect, that's okay! No one has to live in it! It will taste just as good either way! And, the icing doesn't have to be white either.

Be sure to put wax paper underneath the creation. It can get kind of messy."

Chocolate "Love" Fudge

Ingredients:

1 can sweetened condensed milk

1 bag chocolate chips

2 tsp vanilla

Sprinkles or candies

In a sauce pan, heat the condensed milk, vanilla, and chocolate chips until smooth. (vanilla, butterscotch or peanut butter baking chips make interesting variations!) Line a 9X11" pan with foil, and butter the foil. Pour the mixture into the lined pan. Sprinkle rainbow jimmies or colored sugar on top. Or, press M&M's or conversation hearts into the surface. Chill the fudge until firm. Cut the fudge into squares and enjoy... or, wrap it in cellophane to give as a Valentine gift! This is a wonderful, fun recipe to make with children... and who doesn't love fudge?!

The Educational Value of Cooking With Children

For most of us, the use of the words, “education” and “cooking” in the same sentence conjure up memories of 7th grade home economics class. You remember don't you? Burned fingers, egg shells in the dried out brownies, bottoms popped by the class clown who had stolen his neighbor's dish towel, and the fire alarm, set off; at least once a year, without fail. My husband was “Home Ec. Boy of the Year” in 7th grade.



The educational value of cooking need not be confined to the middle school classroom. There is much good to be had from establishing the regular habit of cooking with children. Before my kids were big enough to balance precariously on a kitchen chair, I rented my friend's son... now a strapping young private in the U. S. Army... hard to believe I taught him to squeeze icing through a decorating bag! Now, I have more willing hands than meals in the day. We have been forced to develop a chart to avoid the stampede for the kitchen, jumping up and down and begging to help, which will wear on even the most saintly mother's nerves... not to mention mine!

So what is so educational about cooking dinner? Three year olds learn the principles of good nutrition, five year olds learn to use a paring knife to cut salad veggies, eight year olds learn hands on fractions, ten year olds can practice economics (I paid .45 for this can of 8 oz and 1.25 for this bag of 20 oz... which is cheaper?) fourteen year olds can plan a whole meal, and maybe shop for it, sixteen year olds can run the kitchen for a week as a test for adulthood. No matter the age, there is MUCH to be learned!

So many young women that I talk to were totally unprepared for the role of chief cook and bottle washer when they married. It took them years to learn the basic skills of feeding a family... and their husband's palates can tell the tales! Then, there are other young girls I know, who at 12 could plan, cook and clean-up an entire meal, from

scratch and you would think their mothers had done it. I know 16 year olds who do ALL of the cooking, for their whole families, ALL the time! What makes the difference? Mother, or Dad, taking the time, from a very young age, to include the child in the process.

How young is too young? Well, if they can't stand on a chair, their too young. If they can, find a tiny apron, or sew ties on a towel, they are ready, and generally willing! At 18 months your little helper should belly up to the bar and start tearing up the lettuce for salad, or "folding" the napkins for the table, or "washing" the silverware. By two, they can learn to set the table... in their own way. A five year old can wield a paring knife over salad veggies... "but won't they cut themselves?!" Well of course! Buy band-aids and start with the soft veggies! By ten you should have a regular chef on your hands!

The education doesn't stop with culinary skills. While you work, talk! Celery presents a concrete example of turgidity and vascular bundles. Carrots present a lesson on roots, tap roots and root hairs. Discuss the role of chlorophyll with green veggies. Discuss muscle tissue over chicken chopping. Point out the difference between a solution and a mixture while you make salad dressing. Learn the ABC's with Campbell's soup! Discuss the many wonders of dairy farming... milk, yogurt, cheese, cream, ice cream, sour cream, cream cheese, butter... how are they different, how are they made? Discuss geography! Did you know tomatoes were a New World commodity... what do you suppose the Italians ate before 1492? The list of "educational" moments in the kitchen is endless.

How old is too old? Never! You thought the education was just for the kids! Not so fast! Cooking with your kids WITHOUT an educational agenda will be an education for YOU! Learn who your children are! Talk about what interests them. STOP talking and listen while they let you into their world! Even a six year old has things to say that she wishes Mama would be still enough to hear. Never mind the sixteen year old! Cooking with children is a wonderful way to tie strings to their hearts, in a way that won't be easily undone.

We live in a society where the generation gap has become a chasm. The opinions of peers out weigh the opinions of parents. Hip, cool and trendy, are more important than true, right and just. Bad behavior is labeled a "stage", be it toddlers, teens, or anywhere in between; and rebellion is expected. Drug use is as suburban as it is inner city. Teen (and preteen) sexual behavior is epidemic in proportions. Drinking has become the lesser of the evils. Pornography is mainstream "commercial art". Witchcraft is "trendy". Homosexuality is acceptable school curriculum and the Osbornes have replaced the Cleavers.

REFORM IN EDUCATION AND LIVING INSTRUCTION FOR THE YOUNG

Our society is crumbling around us. The foundation of the family is cracked, and shaky, at best. It may not be possible to reverse the damage overall; but it certainly is possible to get out your mortar and trowel and shore up your corner of the platform. Think about your childhood. What kind of parents did you have? Were they involved? Did they know what was going on in your life? Did they care? Did they listen to you? What did you secretly long for them to do? So many of our adult ailments are blamed on our parents...some justly, some unjustly. The fact remains that the single greatest character forming force in your child's life, is you! Don't be afraid to parent! Set a standard for your home, and set it high. The Pygmalion effect, as it applies to classrooms, also applies equally at home (in a nut shell, you get from children what you expect from them, they either rise to the occasion, or sink to the gutter, depending on your expectations of them)

There is more. Setting a high standard of behavior and moral living for yourself and your children (yourself first, more is caught than taught, and they smell hypocrisy like a dead skunk by the road!) is not enough. If expectations are all you have, and the kids feel only pressure to live up to the mark, then you will lose their hearts. Far more important is the tying of heart strings. We must love our children. We must do more than love them, we must communicate that love in a way that makes them FEEL loved. Not just once in a while, but daily; multiple times daily, constantly. Their lives need to be bathed in our love and acceptance of them. They need to feel our joy at their existence. They need to swim in our pleasure of their being. Only then, will they open their hearts to us, instead of their friends, or others less worthy, and allow us to see into their world, and speak into their world.

Cook with your kids. At two and three, it's a pain and a mess. At five and ten it is a delight. At twelve and thirteen it is crucial. At sixteen and seventeen it is to be savored as the last days of summer. If you have one kid, cook together every day. Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner if you can manage it. If you have a whole herd, like me, then make a chart and rotate them through that kitchen, starting as soon as they can wobble in and wield a spoon.

Cooking is educational. For the kid, sure. Mostly for the parent. Educate yourself!

A Woman and Her Theology

by Stephanie Payton

“I just don’t see what a person’s religion has to do with the choices she makes about her own body.”

The words were uttered quietly, but with firm conviction. In her mind, religion fit in a pretty little box, only to be taken out when it suited her. It had absolutely nothing to do with the choice now facing the woman in question---letting one baby die in an effort to save the other.



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A woman’s theology matters. We may think it doesn’t, or that it is something we only “mess” with during our quiet time or Sunday worship. But the reality is that day in and day out, as women, we are walking out our theology for those around us to view. We cannot escape it.

If you are a mom and were planning on letting Dad take on the theology lessons sometime down the road, do not be fooled into thinking the lessons are on hold until then. From the time you begin parenting your children, their theology lessons have begun. Our children are watching. And they are figuring out who God is as a result of how they see us interacting with Him.

In many ways these past two years have represented my own quest down the road of theological discovery. It began with a decision I made nearly two years ago; a decision that began a running list of questions about who I am as a woman, as a Christian, and most importantly as a child of God. It also led me toward a greater discovery of who God is and how He cares for those He calls his **very own**.

Somewhere along the way, over years filled with Biblical teaching, I confused submission with insipidness and meekness with timidity. Theology was for men and perhaps a few gifted women along the way. Ultimately, as long as I was filling my kids’ minds and learning experiences with spiritual food, my theology wasn’t **that** important, was it? When I even began to think about theology, images of sleepiness and boredom immediately came to mind.

Over time, however, the children’s questions had begun to get harder. And Dad was at work while most of the schooling was completed. And my three oldest children are girls---watching to see how Mom was living out the call to daily pick up the cross and follow Him. Their questions, concerns, and comments were not based upon any book, curriculum, or study. They were dealing with real-life circumstances, and they wanted answers that left them with something real and satisfying. Deferring them to a later time was not an option. Sending them to a theology class was certainly not going to happen! And nothing they were learning in Sunday School even touched the tip of the iceberg called “Our Theological Questions.” When it came right down to it, it was all about Mom,

and how I was handling life. And as I evaluated exactly how I was “handling” life, the score left me less than satisfied. How many days, over how many years, had I gotten up and ready for the day, and put God in my own pretty little box, content to leave Him there until I had need of Him? How many times had I said I could do it on my own, leaving His side and striking out on my own? How many times had I practiced bad theology, both knowingly and unknowingly?

The answers came in a surprising form. Through our women’s retreat at church, I was referred to a book titled When Life and Beliefs Collide, by Carolyn Custis James. The only reference made to this book was that it was a great book for women who wanted to learn how important it is to know their theology and how to put it into practice. Since that time, I have talked with many who do not even remember a reference being made to this book. I think it was my hunger for the information and the touch (i.e. push, shove, shake) of God that drove me to purchase it shortly after that. The information in that book has changed my life. God began to show me where my theology had gone wrong.

As my theology began to right itself, I found myself less afraid of the questions. Did they get any easier? No. Did they get less frequent? No. But I was no longer afraid to dig into them, dig into the Word, and see what God had to say about them---all the time knowing that His love and care for me would not change through the process.

My girls are growing stronger through this, as well. Mom’s theology is rubbing off on them. They are being strongly prepared for the world they are facing. It will be different from the one I faced so many years ago. Their preparation will include things my parents never had to given even a single thought to. Their theology will matter as it has never, perhaps, mattered before.

How about your kids? What theology are you modeling for them day in and day out? Without saying a word, they are learning. Day by day, step by step. Pretty intimidating, isn’t it? But I think you’re up for the task. If you’re even reading this, then I’m guessing you’ve already walked a few difficult steps for Him. Will your kids know beyond a doubt how amazing and beyond compare God is, or will they learn that He is weak and ineffective, capable of being put in your pretty little box and only taken out when you feel like it.

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“Because for some of us it’s just not that easy. Religion isn’t something we just do when we want to. It is the essence of who we are. To think we could take it on and off the shelf when we want to would render it useless, nothing more than a decorative, ineffective trinket .”

Yes, a woman’s theology matters.

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