

Reciprocity and equal dignity in the life of couples

Two Ingenious Beings

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The author, a psychologist and expert in areas related to family and affectivity, reflects on the importance of harmonizing differences, and an awareness that each person brings his or her own irreplaceable contribution to the life of a couple and a family. ¹

It is true that men and women are different. Belonging to one sex or another is not a choice but rather originates at the moment of conception. Physical differences are obvious and our whole body is marked by a sexuality of belonging and ignoring this can become a source of conflict.

Elements of neuroscience, though still under study, point to a male brain being larger than the female brain, by about ten percent.² This does not mean it is more efficient than that of females, but rather that it has a different functionality. Female brains appear to have faster connections between the two hemispheres. Additionally, women tend toward greater right brain specialization while men are oriented more towards the left hemisphere. This would explain women's tendency towards greater overall sensitivity, interiority and intuition, and men's greater propensity towards logical-rational spheres and spatio-temporal orientation³.

In fact, I can offer a few examples in this regard.

In the parish where Raimondo and I became engaged years ago, we were coordinators for a large youth group, and in May of that year, we were involved in organizing a peace march. However, the work was also generating tension, because it was a struggle for Raimondo and me to find a common direction that fully satisfied both of us. We both thought our viewpoint was the right one, and this left the youth stunned. For them, they saw us as models of acceptance and mutual trust!

So, what exactly happened? Truthfully, I had wanted to write key phrases on placards to carry along the streets during the march. But Raimondo did not feel it was necessary and felt that it was essential to be in agreement with the boys in the group. They believed that a banner at the beginning of the parade was enough. I struggled to give up my idea and a little verbal "battle" ensued between the two of us.

But at a certain point, one boy in the group, perhaps a quieter one, came and whispered in my ear, "Don't let me down. Peace is built starting with us, here, right now!" It was like a bucket of cold water poured over my head. I swallowed the tears that came from this sudden realization and began to try again to weave a harmony among our differences, as had been the ideal of my life for some time.

I believe that the great challenge before us is to find new ways to harmonize differences, with the invaluable knowledge and irreplaceable contribution that each person brings. Conflict needs to give way to valuing and exchanging one another's specific being, which then leads both men and women towards even further enrichment.

Thinking without guardrails

Over time, I became passionate about this topic and discovered other nuances in the unexplored world of women and men. I realized Greek philosophy had placed great importance on the universal and the rational, interpreting the world according to verifiable categories. But I also rediscovered the value of emotional intelligence and the complex, important world of emotions.

There is a way of thinking that is typical of women, one "without guardrails", without fixed patterns. It is capable of pursuing not only rational knowledge but also is the result of intuition and feeling. This fluidity in women's thinking, characterized by a continuous attentiveness to the human person (including his or her spiritual dimension), fascinated me. The philosopher María Zambrano emphasized that the time has come for poetry and philosophy, intellect and feeling, to be unified. Today we often speak of IQ (intelligence quotient), but very little about the heart quotient.

Tenderness

There was also another moment in my life that was fundamental for my role as a wife and mother and brought me to deeper feelings of tenderness. Tenderness is not sentimental. Rather it is stepping into the other person's shoes and warmly being there in his or her challenges, and in his or her life. It is attentiveness to small, meaningful gestures of love. Each one of us, man and woman alike, must mature and develop tenderness. But for a woman, because of her typical qualities (sensitivity, intuition, emotional presence), it is precisely through tenderness in difficult relationships that she can be the first to break patterns of incomprehension and initiate new ways of being together.

In the early years of our marriage, there were often conflicts over how to manage the house, raise our children, and handle elements tied to our feelings, because we both have strong personalities. One day I was in crisis and could not accept that Raimondo, upon returning home tired from his demanding job, underestimated all that was involved in my handling two small daughters and the complex upkeep of the house. But I had also learned in times of conflict to seek help from spirituality books and always found great benefit from this. I randomly picked up a book in search of help, one written to help spouses.

There, a sentence opened my horizons: "The woman holds the keys to tenderness." I realized that I was losing the "specificity" of myself as feminine. I was no longer looking at things with the eyes of the heart, but rather from a kind of 'calculated' view of life. I had forgotten that true love doesn't use scales to 'weigh' the work of one person compared to another.

So, I waited for Raimondo with a different attitude, trying to put myself in his shoes and what he was experiencing. I was able to 'decentralize myself' and welcomed him with an unexpected embrace, one that I saw served to build a totally new relationship between us.

The masculine genius

But in rediscovering tenderness, I sense it was not right to speak only about *feminine* genius, which brings to mind the story of Mariella and Guido.

One summer evening, we took a walk with Mariella and Guido along the waterfront. They were despondent because their children were struggling, refusing to listen anymore, and were coming home at all hours of the night. There was also a fear that one of the children was using drugs. In talking together, we tried to enter into their pain. They humbly told us where they think they have made mistakes, because Guido was often absent from home life, and for convenience's sake, Mariella did everything herself in the house, thinking it better and faster than Guido organizing the boys. But this resulted in Guido no longer being a part of their children's lives, and he sometimes felt like an outsider. For the sake of peace in the house, he became more and more entrenched in his sports interests and television. Thus, the worst possible thing happened: the father's role was eliminated, and a super mom was created.

Although women are slowly gaining new roles today (at least in many cultures), men instead can find themselves disoriented. While losing seemingly traditional roles, men do not yet know how to find new ones. That is why it is urgent for them to regain those specific traits, like joyful giving, vigor, courage, risk taking, and strength, but in a new way that avoids attitudes of supremacy and gives space to feelings and emotions.

In need of a father

Mariella and Guido's experience underscore the *need for a father's presence*. Many fathers today seem to be running, partly due to work demands and partly because of a fear of falling into authoritarianism. They sometimes prefer to be 'their son's friend'. Children need father figures to provide clear maps to help them find their way, and clear rules that allow them to experience that they are not all powerful. If offered with gentleness and empathy, rules can be a source of strength, for without them children easily become anxious and insecure, which leads to constantly challenging adults and authority.

This is my hope for the future: men and women, two ingenious beings capable of harmoniously living together in total acceptance of one another's gifts, without falling into rigid patterns of "differences."

Perhaps each of us has yet to discover the full meaning of reciprocity. A reflection by the Dutch author, Etty Hillesum, seems significant and still quite relevant: "Perhaps the true, the essential emancipation of women still has to come. We are not yet full human beings; we are the "weaker sex"... Women still must be born as human beings; that is the great task that lies before us."⁶

¹ Maria Lubrano Scotto has carried out numerous activities on behalf of the family and participated in national and international conferences. Together with her husband Raimondo Scotto she is the author of books translated into several languages. We recall in particular (with Città Nuova): *The Declinations of Love* (2001); *Sexuality and Tenderness* (2010); *Man-Woman* (2011); *The Dance of Love* (2017); *Awakening Happiness* (2022).

² Cf. L. Eliot, Dolls and Balls, in "Mind and Brain - The Sciences," No. 68, Year VIII, August 2010, p. 29; F. Mangia. *Genetic mechanisms of sex determination*, in C. Simoncelli (ed.), *Psychology of sexual and affective development*, Carocci, Rome 2008, p. 27.

³ Cf. M. Piazzini - C. Fatini, *Recollections of anatomy, genetics and embryology*, in G. Rifelli, *Clinical sexology*, Masson, Milan 1996, p. 26; W. Pasini, *Life in Two. The couple in their twenties, forties and sixties*, Oscar Mondadori, Milan 2007, p. 14.

⁴ R. Cantalamessa, *Homily*, April 6, 2007, reported at www.vatican.va.

⁵ C. Lubich, *Heart of Humanity*, in "GEN" no. 3, March 1, 1974.

⁶ Monday, August 4, 1941. Taken from: E. Hillesum, *Diary 1941-1943*, Adelphi, Milan 1985, p. 52.