

BOOK REVIEW

What Mum Taught Us: Valuable Lessons and Outstanding Hospitality, Including Precious Mesopotamian Recipes

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No man is an island
John Donne

A human being is a creature who needs another person. From their earliest years, people learn collaboration with others and the life in community. Every person is born and develops in a family – an institution present in all epochs and cultures, a basic social unit consisting of a group of people interrelated by the bonds of marriage and kinship.

A family, its inner structure, all its functions, relationships, daily meetings, as well as its history, culture and tradition constitute the family home. Among many functions which the family has always had to fulfil, there is the building of the family home in both the spiritual (non-material) and material dimension. This means the place which brings together the emotionally closest people, creates favourable conditions for the life and development of a family community, for education of the young generation and cross-generation transmission, which enables fulfilling the basic (physiological, safety) and higher level needs (love, belonging, recognition, self-actualization). The need of home is felt with particular intensity. Everyone wants to have a home – a safe and peaceful place, a kind of sanctuary. A home consists of a family, its members, relations between them, daily routine, common aspirations, the arrangement of interpersonal relations, the specific climate of family home – every home separately.

The family home has some specific qualities, such as: closeness, intimacy, feeling of safety, the experiencing of home, hierarchical structure, openness, a place of meeting and dialogue, privacy, well-organized space, a set of meaningful objects, traditions, transmission of culture, emotional bonds which integrate family members. For all of them, home is a place of co-existence, mutual contacts, work, leisure and celebration. The ties between family members are shaped in everyday being together in various situations. Home is a space of the child's life and development, collecting the first experiences, acquiring the knowledge of the world, social and moral norms, the system of values, interpersonal communication and co-experience.

With no doubt, The Issa Family has been and surely will be an example of such a family community. Meeting them in 2014 was a real pleasure and the enormous impression they made on me has not left me till now. Being invited to prepare a review of the book *What Mum Taught Us. Valuable Lessons and Outstanding Hospitality, Including Precious Mesopotamian Recipes*, authored by the Issa siblings, is a great honour and distinction for me.

In my review, the following will be consecutively assessed:

- the structure of the work and its content;
- the choice and use of sources and the formal aspect of the book.

The multigenerational family community of the Issas, composed of the parents – Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa and her husband V. Rev. Fr. Boutros Touma Issa, their children and grandchildren, is situated in a particular time and space, which are not universal and abstract in social

experience but given with the “humanistic coefficient”. Referring to the currently developing direction in family studies called humanistic geography enables not only the analysis and description of the location of cultural artefacts in space (through its mapping) but also – and first of all – the specification of the ways in which the family experiences and provides value to a particular space, which in this way gets symbolic meaning. A family home becomes such a space – both individual and common for parents and their children. Through the experienced and accepted values implemented in this home, all of them shape their identity here and enter relationships with other members.

Referring to their individual family experiences, the authors – the Issa siblings – outline in 11 chapters the most valuable “lessons” in their lives, given to them by their Mother – a significant Person and the most important Teacher, who passed away on the 2nd March 2016. The memories dedicated to Her and the character of the publication are most completely reflected in the words from the Introduction (p. 6):

This is a story about a Wonderful Mother.

This is a story about a mother who has the biggest heart in all the world. A mother who loves without condition and never gives up hope.

A mother who offers all she can give and expects nothing in return.

This is a story about a mother who works so hard and did so much.

The next chapters introduce the Reader into the family history, viewed from the perspective of adult children, who have been well-educated and are currently outstanding academic teachers working for Western Australian universities Curtin and Murdoch in Perth, as well as committed activists of the Syriac Orthodox Church. The youngest Author and the youngest son in the family, Theodore, is currently the President of The Western Australia Council of Churches.

In a reflective and literary manner, the Authors open for us “the door” to their family home, in which quite palpably, we can experience its unique hospitality, openness to themselves and to Others, their sincerity in daily relations and their deep religiousness. This atmosphere has been always created by the whole Family, yet – it was mostly the Mother who integrated the family life and gave it a unique character. It was expressed in love and care for the nearest, daily work at home or in the garden, and in the efforts in favour of them. I was privileged to experience such moments in The Issa Family, which received us, scientists from Poland, as their closest members. They devoted their precious time to us, took us round their unique home, and treated us with delicious traditional dishes. In this intimately personal way, all chapters of the book are constructed – starting from the history of the Family, its culturally diverse national and religious roots, through valuable, wise lessons of life given to her children by Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa, Her hospitality, cheerfulness, to the family rituals associated with contemporary cuisine and garden care.

Careful Readers, going in-depth into consecutive pages of this comprehensive book, obtain much more than a chronicle of the history of one family’s life. They get a timeless testimony, a volume on the history of humanity, which once again confirms the sense of and need for family life – the life that entwines both beautiful and difficult moments, the necessity to change the place of living and the daily toil concerning the functioning and sometimes survival of the family, supported by faith and prayer.

Therefore, let us not forget – referring to the words of Seneca, an ancient philosopher and sage, who wrote them almost two hundred years ago – that “everything has its own time: it is born, it grows, it dies. The celestial bodies whose turns you can follow in the sky, as well as this earth, with which we were united and where we were placed as something the most lasting, will be destroyed and gone. Everything has its old age: by uneven paths of time the nature sends into the same place. Whatever exists, it will not exist, but it will not perish but will be divided into particles.”

What deserves emphasis while assessing the formal side of the book is that collecting the information and materials on The Issa Family required a lot of time and patience to search for various types of documents, photographs, spoken accounts, but on the other hand – this turned out to be a fascinating occupation for all the siblings, without whose effort the book would not get its shape and nature. As a reviewer, I highly appreciate the care of Authors for a thoughtful book structure, for providing it with an extensive annex, the translations of Bible verses into Syriac/Aramaic – the original language of Mesopotamia, a bibliography and an index.

The book is read with enormous interest, its content value is enriched with coloured photographs of the whole Family, its particular members, the family house and garden. What also seems cognitively precious are all the recipes for dishes and cakes of the traditional and contemporary Mesopotamian cuisine. The detailed recipes and instructions, as well as the attached photographs, encourage to make the dishes.

To sum up the above outlined comments, I would like to express my opinion that the book *What Mum Taught Us. Valuable Lessons and Outstanding Hospitality, Including Precious Mesopotamian Recipes*, authored by Theodora Issa, Touma B. Issa, Tomayess Issa, Tamara Issa and Theodore Issa, is a cognitively interesting study dedicated to the life story of Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa and Her Family. It was presented against the background of social, cultural and religious conditions. Due to the discussed subject matter and its topicality for the development of the theory and practice of family pedagogy and intercultural education, the publishing of the book is fully desired and justified.



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