

Chapter 4 – Maze Minding

“Even before the arrival of our first child, the roles and responsibilities were changing—and though the decision of children was a mutual decision—I wondered if we were really ready and that she would ever be...

When you have no children in marriage, an old fixer-upper (referring to the house in Savannah) may be the challenge or objective; but when children come along, things change...lots of things.

She had married with the expressed intention of being an accountant, a CPA and with a firm. In less than two years after marriage, she had accomplished this objective and was working for a local, reputable firm. She was on her way.

Less than a year after that, we moved from Florida to Savannah. With minimal sacrifice—it seemed—she was able to continue her profession though roughly 120 miles from her former position or home. But miles is not so much the issue, nor the change from one firm to other; but the real sacrifice would prove to be moving from home, from her family and in particular, her mother.

Moving to Savannah seemed like a great idea and, as in much of the experience, was a good idea. We found a great church and began to develop several friends through church and job. Living for six months in an apartment, we were able to save and purchase an old house in a fine neighborhood. We enjoyed bike rides, a few trips to the beach and South Carolina, and the general charm of that town. It just seemed to be good.

When she lost her job, she was devastated. Though I had not lost a job yet, I would within a few years later. I know what it's like to lose a job. But I also know what it's like to be arrested at work, escorted off to jail and terminated for absenteeism while you wait in jail for a hearing. Yes, I know what it's like to lose your job because your trying to help your children.

But in her loss (of job) was the good news of our pregnancy. We had not really talked about children before marriage, but positive influence from other church families gave reason to try—and so we did...and it did...and he did.

His name would be Matthew Kirk Rainer—with the obvious sharing of our middle names and the joining of a favorite, “Matthew”. After finding out about her pregnancy, I could **not** have been more excited with both anticipation and the possible experience of being a parent. Like marriage though, we both had little experience in the caring of children—being the youngest in each family—and were clearly heading down an un-cleared road called parenthood. Even before the arrival of our first child, the roles and responsibilities were changing; and though the decision of children was a mutual decision, I wondered if we were really ready.

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In the months to follow, she elected to return to Florida while I stayed-on to try to finish the house and put it on the market for sell. This was a particularly tough time financially and, though she had found employment in Florida, we were trying to support two households. Selling the house continued (and would continue on), and I returned to Florida after finding employment there.

I was glad to be back with her, and excited about sharing in the last days of the pregnancy; but I was also worried about the house—as was she. We had done much—as much as we thought we could—to prepare the house for market and now, as an alternative, we were renting it. As first time “landlords”, we had to experience late and delinquent payments, than no payments, and than magistrates’ court for eviction...and a mess.

This house, from sell to rent to a Quit-Claim Due, was a mess indeed; but it was perhaps preparation for what would come—as past experiences can help prepare or condition us for the future. This house had become a mess to be sure, but would pale in comparison to divorce and its aftermath—which I call *The Mess*...with a capital “M”. If *The Mess* was an iceberg, the house would have been an ice-cube. Need I say more? Yes, I have...and I will....

“Maze Minding” is not exclusive of “Lifetime Lifting” or “Covenant Caring” or even “Gondola Grand”, but it involves all three: this term of “Maze Minding” is about making choices, decisions and directions; not always the right one, mind

you, but ideally making these decisions together—and not alone or in opposition. It is about making these decisions together, in unity and with shared responsibility—though sometimes as a lead...and other times as the follower.

We did make a decision to do a Quit Deed as an alternative to foreclosure. Even with the premature sell (or loss) of the house, we had each other and we had a child. Yes, the decision was not favorable—although this was more a matter of the term or length of ownership than anything else.

Families and individual mortgage owners experience problems like this; as I speak, our nation is experiencing an unprecedented number of failures or foreclosures—and it could get worse! Thus, I do not consider the matter as a lifelong failure. I will not look back on this failure with such regret because the intention was good—which most of all, was to purchase a house that my wife liked and I thought could appreciate for the years to come.

Having a child was another example of “Maze Minding”. Yes, we were influenced by others; but how often do such influences occur in the decision to have children? It is just natural and with good intentions. Even natural and with good intentions, she may not have really wanted children or she may have not really wanted to move away to Georgia. Yet, she did move away and, at times, seemed excited despite the lurking problems with the house and the subtle phobia of living too far away from family.

Making decisions is sometimes very hard and very risky—don’t you agree? If not hard enough making some of these for ourselves, it is even harder and more risky making them for others. It seems that whether with the move, the house, or the child that when things *went south*, the risks rose to the occasions and good intentions were punished. To move was adventurous until the loss of the job; and the house was exciting until it would not sell; and the child was wonderful until those late nights and other demands of parenting. If you

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embrace the decision and its profits, than shouldn't you also accept the outcome and its losses or setback or sacrifices? Yes, it's all part of "Maze Minding".

These decisions and directions are part of our careers, part of personal lives and part of our spiritual lives. As taught, the spiritual is supposed to guide the personal and professional; but when the first does not direct the second or third, there may be added trouble. On the other hand, trouble is not exclusive to this arrangement—as trouble can come to anyone and anytime—even if they haven't earned it, so to speak. It's not so much about judging the matter on whether it was his fault or her fault or their fault; but it is about dealing with "the fault", trouble or risks. When one begins to hold the other responsible for the bad times or difficulties, the other begins to wonder why?

Part of our preparation during pregnancy was birthing classes; and this was a time of good intentions as well as good participation on the part of dad. The plan to actually "be there" and to participate was an unforgettable and beautiful experience. I was present for all four of my children and would not have wanted it any other way. To witness each is unforgettable and the most spectacular of miracles. I know, it's just a baby and a birth, but I cannot get over the basic observation of witnessing this tiny being—this helpless, crying and tiny being.

Our first baby was very difficult; and after many hours of breathing with minimal dilation, she was subjected to what I describe as a large suction cup. Quickly moving me out of the way, a team of pushers piled to the room, flanked my wife, and began pushing her stomach while he pulled with this device. To tell you the truth, I wonder how she (and he) survived all the momentary pressure. But within what seemed like seconds, Matthew was born.

Our child was in fine form, but "mom" was exhausted; she had probably incurred a chipped vertebra during the last of this delivery and some significant tearing with the push-and-pull pressure. With nearly a day from check-in until delivery, she needed much time for rest and recovery. For the new parents, rest would become a much sought after and sometimes deficient want or necessity. Matthew was not a sleeper and, in my recollection, neither were any of our four

children. Benjamin, the third of the four, was plagued by a recurring ear infection; and both he and our daughter had strabismus—or an eye deviation that required surgery; while Brian-Wesley, the youngest, had to have his adenoids removed. Aside from these medical problems, the demands of raising children and of parenting seemed never ending at times. Life had changed, roles had changed and we were changing too.

Matthew did not necessarily sleep and, though healthy by all indication, was subject to his two hour naps and a lot of rocking whether by us or using his rocking cradle or chair. Not to sell the prospective parent on such modern devices, but this piece of *baby-support equipment* was a lifesaver. Laying him in and cranking it up, he might sleep for some length or hum before nodding off. Matthew would seemingly sing himself to sleep.

We had much to learn and, though reading the book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, I was but a babe when it came to caring for babes. Still, the modern conveniences of disposal diapers and wipes, disposal inner-bag bottles, and a variety of other necessary and optional items put me in contention for the next grade and maybe even a promotion.

Perhaps the demands of parenting and the pressures of the house had some significant change on our lives; so much so, that arguments and contention began to surface and re-surface in our relationship. During the early stages of this contention, I suggested that we get counseling—but she refused. She most likely confided in family—and a friend or two—but did not want to consider counseling at that time.

As the primary income earner during this time, I felt compelled to try to advance my career or make more income as possible. During the years of child-bearing she worked, but most of time it was for our church as a bookkeeper with less income than before. It was a demanding situation for her however; as I worked full-time, went to school at night, and eventually taught as an adjunct instructor. **Our lives became very demanding and taxed.**

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In looking back, and perhaps anticipating what some of the readers might be thinking, “Why have children; why four children?” It is a good question, and one that I have not quite found a complete answer for; except to say that it was what we did because we could and because we thought that having children was a blessing and an overall benefit. What is important in this belief is the introductory word “we”; but what remains indefinite or uncertain is whether that is really what she wanted too? Yes, it was demanding and we were taxed; and we began to fight and have contention rather than general cohesion in our relationship; but my feeling was sometimes what others would say in the demands of life: this too will pass.

Eventually, these demands did pass: first, the children got through their irregular sleeping patterns, and individual and common illnesses; second, they began to crawl, walk and run; and third, I began to take them on the Saturdays or the weekends to give her time to re-cooperate. We (the children and I) would go to the park, go walking, go to a nature trail, go to a nearby church and play by the river, go a museum and go to the beach. In those early years, we traveled from the old fort in Fernandina to the old fort in St. Augustine and everywhere in between.

When Matt turned six, we enrolled him in cub scouting and, with our other kids, would pile into the old van and go to his events. Matt in scouting and others in tow, our day trips and occasional overnights became routine. At the same time, my parents began to help by taking the kids up to Alabama for a week or two. Before they entered school programs and during breaks and summers, this arrangement was possible and often planned and carried-out. Finally, there was her mother and a friend that, between the two of them, also offered care and support. In the later relationship, her friend was a true blessing—as she helped with both verbal and actionable support.

The first baby was our experiment, the second was a surprise, the third was planned, and the last slipped-in right behind him. It sounds rather simple and serial but, of course, it was not...that simple or easy. On the contrary, it seemed impossible in moments, tolerable at times, and accommodating because

it was acceptable and appropriate. My wife worked hard—and mother’s can—but she had lots of help and support too.

For someone who is new at a job or vocation, there can be the dilemma between needing help and wanting no help; if offered help, you may not accept it, or accept it with gratitude. You may want help, but you may not want too much help. Call it pride or call it determination, but it still works-out to be a dilemma. To complicate this dilemma is that it can vary from one event or circumstance to the next and leave the needy (or thought to be needy), and the help (or intended help) both confused and even frustrated.

I understood my role as a “first-alternate” helper, but I also had to work and, at times, teach and go to school. Yes, I chose to do these things but, whether one job or the next, considered it to be beneficial to her and to them. Sometimes my other demands were viewed as an excuse and not a reason for my absence. This sense and disposition is probably common for couples—and particularly when their roles are changing or have changed—but this situation was another example of the dilemma described previously. You can be helped or you try to help; but if you rebuff the help than resent the helper, how can you be helped and how can “the intended” help you?

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Her friend had much better success in this position; as she offered the empathy of another mother, the love of a genuinely *good heart*, and the patience and persistence to be the best and the most-appreciated of helpers. My wife’s mother was not really accepting of being this type of help but, I think, considered my wife to be “the help” or, more likely, the helpless when the mother was around. Redressing the lifestyle of *command and control*, I am convinced that her mother could make her angry and frustrated in the simple task of helping than one could believe at first. I know from own experience at working with my dad, it could be either his way or the sub-standard way; but for her mother, help

may have been most appreciated in the form of encouragement or “Lifetime Lifting”; but as already discussed, *command and control* took a different course.

The mother and daughter relationship is important, of course. The demands of her mother’s role—as both parent and full-time employment—left little time for a big family. Moreover, the mother (and children) had to contend with the role of their father that undoubtedly intensified the demands of the home. Yes, my wife’s mother chose to remain married to her first husband, married the “second him”, and tolerated them both to the end. But in her own “Maze Minding”, she chose or made some choice too.

Similarly, my wife and I made choices and, I would argue, often with good intentions or purpose for the family. I worked hard and helped with the children on the weekends; she worked hard and sometimes had some or much of the weekend to rest or recreate if possible. Raising children was a challenge and one where encouragement can make a positive difference and criticism can not. Where a mother can find such a positive difference is among other mothers—who understand and can be more empathetic. But where frustration and hurt can find its greatest cause is from those whom are seemingly closest to us. She had been through a lot with her mother—and her mother had put them through a lot—but *command and control* superceded them all.

My wife was looking for her own mother’s approval. It was not enough that her husband approved or complimented her, but it was the approval that most children (if not all children) naturally seek from the parent or parents. Simply put, it’s that simple and periodic expression of love that comes in verbal or affectionate action. For the good friend that may have become a somewhat surrogate mother or sister, the approval was in the form of true help—without criticism or some subtle competition. For her mother—though a much more complicated relationship—the expectation and desire for approval was still wanting from my wife’s childhood...and perhaps always will be.

To be more specific, this needed approval was most-likely not existent or, at best, occasional in her childhood (to include adolescence). At the risk of sounding like a self-described therapist (or a ex-spouse looking for excuses), I am trying to consider the importance of parents and their relationship to their children. My wife had longed for this approval. At this major juncture of life as a parent herself, she was looking for the simple expression of approval from the one remaining parent. But I don't think her mother was capable of offering such.

Above all, her mother approved of and most-likely fostered independence. Not independence from her necessarily, but independence economically – because a man is not reliable and worse, could be a rogue. To have children in the first place, would put her in jeopardy of the same plight that the mother had experienced; so to have children was my wife's first mistake (in the reasoning of her mother). In retrospect, I don't think my wife considered her mother's opinion in the actual choice to have children. I could be wrong but, with what I saw and have shared thus far, her mother's scars (or wounds) were just too deep to have overcome this experience—for her and potentially, for her children.

In my observation, having children (or grandchildren) was bittersweet for my wife's mother: on the one hand, she could potentially needle her way to *command and control*—which gave her the sense that she was still needed; or she could critique and criticize as another form of control. The “bitter” aspect of this relationship or choice was her own failures to her children—in light of the addiction and abuse—and concern perhaps that her children just might be able to do a pretty good job at it (marriage and family) despite the past. Somewhat like a child, her mother was very insecure, and subject to similar motives to manipulate for the probable reason that she too was looking for approval...from her own children!

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Our family—and particularly my wife—was not the first to endure the nature of the (or these) relationships. The oldest couple, who had three children, was also under frequent fire—and had been for some time, it seemed. Not always directly from the mother—but certainly approved (or accepted) by her—the criticism was such that they could do no right even though I think they did a lot right.

What I observed overtime is that they (the oldest couple with three children) eventually or progressively distanced themselves from the mother and potentially other family. “If you can’t stand the heat, than get out of the kitchen”; and if you can do no right as far as their concerned, than don’t leave mad...but just leave. They made a choice to leave—though living just across town.