

Can someone care too much?

Bert Witvoet

When my dad married my mother in 1929, they soon discovered after the excitement of the first year how different they really were. Mom was a realist, practical and not all that comfortable with emotions. Dad was guided a lot by feelings and by unexpected ideas. For him to settle in a small Frisian village was a challenge. He was born in the province Overijssel, but after both his parents died when he was 13, he lived in various Dutch cities. Mom was more of a local girl. She never thought she would live outside the borders of Joure. Joure (5,000 inhabitants) was her home and that settled everything ... she thought.

There was one incident in their marriage that really challenged their relationship. It all started rather innocently.

Dad, because he did not attend church on a regular basis before he met Mom, had a number of "worldly" friends. Although these friendships fell away after he married Mom and joined Mom's church, one incident revealed an unexpected development.

One of Dad's friends took part in black market activities during the Second World War. The local police had become suspicious and investigated this friend's house. But they found nothing that was contraband. Yet they were sure Dad's friend was guilty. Somehow their trail led to investigate this man's friends.

I was home sick one day. I must have been about nine years old. As I was lying in bed, the local police knocked on our door and said they needed to search our house. When they stepped into my bedroom, they asked me to step out of bed so they could search the mattress. Maybe they thought my sickness was an invention to hide the items of food my Dad was hiding. They found nothing, and I could return to my sickbed.

Later I was told the the police had searched a hidden storage place in our kitchen and had found the stuff my Dad had been hiding to protect his friend. They arrested and questioned him, but my Dad could not bring himself to betray his friend. So he ended up first spending a few days in a local cell, then being transported to a jail in the provincial capital, before he was brought before a judge and sentenced to several months of forced labour at some distant camp in another province.

A straight plan

One can imagine that all of this really put pressure on the relationship between my parents. Had they been mistaken? Should they not have married each other? Mom admitted later in life that, had they married some 30 years later, divorce might have been a consideration. For me to consider that question challenges my own existence, of course. But the thought comes to mind nevertheless.

But before I close my file on my parents' difficult marriage, I feel obliged to point out that God can always make a somewhat crooked path straight. One thing that often comes to my mind is that my Dad was a totally unselfish person. He found it

impossible not to help out a friend, even if it placed him in danger. He made a mistake, of course, because by so doing he also threatened the fabric of his marriage and family. But it was not a selfish or dishonest act on his part. In a way he cared too much for others and neglected to protect his own territory. I also wonder why the police felt it necessary to escalate a minor offence at a time when the main problem was the evil aggression of a man like Hitler and his cronies. At least, I think the punishment applied to my Dad was out of proportion. Unfortunately, my Dad's caring personality may have cost him his life. He did not live long after this incident. Although the war came to an end in April, 1945, food was still in short supply, especially for a family with seven kids. Mother always told us that Dad often gave up part of his plate so that his children could have enough to eat. When he fell ill in January 1947 and died of an infection in the brain, was it because his body had not had enough nourishment? Had he been too unselfish at the dinner table? We will never know for sure, but it's a distinct possibility.

My older brother George, who passed away some years ago, used to have a vivid picture in his memory that helped us all to hold our father in high regard. As George passed through the hall of our house in Joure one day, he caught a glimpse of Dad kneeling in front of a living room chair in the middle of the day. George had expected Dad to be at work in the lady's salon. But instead, the one we lovingly remember as "Vader" felt the need to pray to his Father, while a machine was blowing a customer's hair dry in the salon. This is the man I like to remember as someone who deserves my respect and the respect of my children and grandchildren.

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