

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Batman

It was a quiet evening. I was at home. Our daughter Jaime was upstairs in her room. Nancy and I were sitting in the family room. Both of us were reading. We were both absorbed in our books and quite relaxed.

I then said to Nancy, “Did something fly by?” I didn’t hear anything, and because I was so engrossed in my novel (Dostoevsky requires a wee bit of concentration), I was (almost) gone to the world. It occurred to me that I might have seen something black, but I wasn’t sure.

Almost instantly, I remembered how our neighbors had said something about a bat. Over the Christmas holidays, we were visiting family and friends out of town, and our neighbors were house-sitting (dog sitting, actually: Daisy doesn’t like to be alone). When we returned, one of them said, “We think we may have seen a bat in your house!”

That got our attention—especially Jaime’s: she says that she harbors what she calls an irrational fear of bats and insects. I searched the house inside and out. I could not find the bat. So for the most part, I forgot about it, until that night when I was reading.

About four or five seconds later, I looked up, and about four feet from me, suspended in the middle of our family room, was a bat. Its wing span was about ten inches. Having hovered under the light on the ceiling fan, it then flew around the family room.

Kicking into my chivalrous mode, I said to Nancy, “The bat is not aggressive. It won’t hurt you. Stay calm!” I then faked calmness.

Now what? For reasons I can’t remember, I was absent from college the day that they taught bat-ology. This meant I was improvising under pressure.

Jaime called from her bedroom, “What’s all the commotion?”

I said, “It’s the bat. You may want to close your bedroom door!”

I went to the front door and opened it, hoping that the bat would fly outside. After all, that’s where the bugs were. Wasn’t the bat hungry? Perhaps. But it was also January in Kansas. We’ve had an extraordinarily mild winter, but I’m not sure this bat wanted to be that cold. It just wouldn’t fly out the door.

So I said to Nancy, “Bring me something to strike it down with.” The dustpan was handy, and she handed it to me. The next time the bat flew by me, I hit it with the dustpan. I tried not to hit it too hard. I didn’t want to kill it. I did, however, hit it hard enough that it fell to the floor. I then scooped it out the door, which, needless to say, I promptly closed.

The rest of the evening, I couldn’t get my mind off the bat. The thing that bothered me the most was the fear that I might have killed it. I didn’t want to hurt the bat, but I certainly wanted it out of the house.

That night, I woke up a few times, wondering about the bat. The next morning, I went out to get the paper, to discover that the bat was gone. A colleague at the university told me that bats are in fact tough little creatures, and that in her opinion, I had done the

right thing. She even suggested that I ask for a tennis racket for my birthday. I told her that I thought that a badminton racket would be more apropos.

I don't know whether this is true or not, but when I thought about it for the next couple of days, I realized that during those moments when I was in our home, face to face with the bat, the bat wasn't welcome, and I couldn't think about anything else. For better, for worse, I'm not Batman, and I probably never will be. I then thought about the presence of the bat as a parable for a whole lot of things. What happens when we cannot, or will not, welcome someone into our lives? What are the consequences of an obsession with getting rid of someone? What does that *do* to the person?

To turn it around, what about saying to a family member or a friend, "You belong here. You are important to me. You are welcome, and nothing will change that."

I think our children know when we want them. They know when they are welcome. So does our spouse or our significant other. When we convey to someone that they are as welcome as a bat from Kansas, we poison the whole climate in our home. But when our actions, our demeanor, and our attitudes say, "You belong here, you are welcome, and I receive you as a friend, as a child of God," we create an atmosphere in which we can relax in each other's company. It becomes a climate in which we can heal, learn, grow, and eventually thrive.