

Overheard in Waterstones in Milton Keynes recently, full of people in a desperate search for presents at the last moment: a father to a young teenage daughter:

‘We are not giving your mother a book entitled *How to Think like a Dog*. I’ve been married to her for eighteen years . . .’

And then they moved off and I didn’t catch the rest of the conversation but my guess is that this was a husband who knew both his own limits and the limits of his wife and this would stand them both in good stead for another eighteen years of what to say and what not to say, of what to give and what not to give. Whether the daughter was teasing the father I’m not sure but she too will be on a learning curve here. This is life lived in any sort of community, learning the checks and balances of love. Monks and nuns (or should I say nuns and monks?) are generally excused the fraught nature of blood ties and are not family, in this sense, as Dom Gregory was keen to insist, warning us against the danger of attempting to re-create family in community; our vocation is always more solitary than this. But solitary doesn’t necessarily mean curmudgeonly, without friendship, keeping everyone else at a distance. It’s still about learning the strengths and weaknesses of one another and the mutuality we all share as human beings. Living together necessarily generates pain as well as joy; necessarily involves resistance from the other. This is what makes us real, both to one another and to ourselves or, to adapt the words of Simone Weil,

*Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country (this people)(this partner) (this child) that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love it (or them or her or him)*  
(*For Love of Beauty* p.56 in *Love in the Void*)

A thought taken up by Rowan Williams:

*If I really have no interest that is just mine in a marriage, there may be circumstances where I have to question what I think I want, where I must hold back and think again about my aims.*  
(*Tokens of Trust* p. 110)

This is Joseph pondering what’s best for himself and Mary and the child but

*Equally what matters to the other partner is that I am ‘I’, not some bloodless fantasy that suits them, so that what matters for my life and health matters to the other.*

This is Mary concerned for Joseph and the child. This is God concerned for us. Like both Joseph and Mary, the book we need to read is not *How to Think Like a Dog* but *How to Think Like an Angel*.

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