Book Reflection: What Is Holding the Family Together?

Reflections from Nancy Pearcey's The Toxic War on Masculinity

While reading Nancy Pearcey's *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, one observation stood out to me: emotional work within marriage may be more important today than ever before because many of the practical things that once helped hold families together have weakened or disappeared.

In the past, families were often connected through more than emotion. Extended family was more involved in everyday life.

- Evidence: In 1900, 57% of Americans age 65 and older lived in multigenerational households, compared with 22% in 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Before industrialization separated much of our work from the home, families were more likely to work toward a common livelihood or enterprise.

- Evidence: The U.S. Small Business Administration, citing SCORE, reports that only 30% of family-owned businesses survive from the first to the second generation and only 12% from the second to the third generation (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2018).

Entertainment was also less individualized, requiring families to spend more of their recreational time together.

- Evidence: A national U.S. survey found that 87% of parents wished they could spend more quality time with their teens, while 63% of teens wished they could spend more quality time with their parents (Center for Parent and Teen Communication [CPTC] & YouGov, n.d.). The same survey found that 55% of parents and 39% of teens said other responsibilities interfered with spending quality time together.

A husband didn't have to constantly explain that he loved his family because much of that love was being demonstrated through what he did alongside them. They worked together, provided for one another, cared for relatives, solved problems, sacrificed, served, and enjoyed life together.

The emotional work was still there. It just wasn't the star of the show.

Much of it came out practically and substantively through shared life.

Today, many of those practical bonds have been separated. Work takes us in different directions. Extended family may live hundreds of miles away. Technology allows everyone in the same house to enjoy completely different forms of entertainment. A family can live under one roof while spending remarkably little time actually doing life together.

As those other bonds weaken, emotional connection is being asked to carry more of the weight of the family.

That has particular implications for men. The emotional work once expressed through the ordinary responsibilities and activities of family life can now become the central measure of whether a husband or father is connected to his family. Communication, vulnerability, affirmation, and emotional availability move to the foreground because fewer shared activities reinforce the relationship in the background.

Those things aren't bad. Men should communicate. Husbands should know their wives. Fathers should know their children. Emotional intimacy matters.

But when emotional connection becomes the star of the show, it can also become superficial and fragile. We can start measuring the strength of a relationship mainly by how connected we feel, rather than by the substance of the life we are actually sharing.

And emotions move.

We feel close and then distant. We feel affectionate and then frustrated. We become tired, stressed, distracted, hurt, or discouraged. A difficult week can make a healthy marriage feel disconnected, while an emotional high can make a relationship appear stronger than its actual foundation.

That's a fragile place to put a family's weight.

The solution isn't for men to become less emotionally connected. Perhaps the solution is to give emotional connection more substance underneath it.

We can intentionally restore some of what modern life has separated. A family can find something meaningful to build or serve together. It could be a business, nonprofit, ministry, project, or cause that gives everyone a role and creates unity of effort. Families can put technology away regularly and choose something they actually enjoy together. And when extended family isn't nearby, the local church can become more than somewhere the family attends on Sunday. It can become a genuine community of brothers and sisters with whom the family serves, eats, celebrates, struggles, and shares life.

So, men, we don't need to recreate the past. But some things that once happened naturally may now have to happen intentionally.

Walk Worthy.