

Controlling the Unpredictable — The Power of Promising

When you make a promise, you have created a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability

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Somewhere a father is telling himself, "I wish my daughter would pack up, leave home, and never come back; God knows she has driven us crazy." But he remembers a promise he made when she was baptized, and he sticks with her in hurting love.

Somewhere a woman is telling herself, "I want to get out of this marriage and start over with someone who really loves me; God knows the clod I married has given me reason for cashing him in." But she remembers a promise she made when she married him and she sticks with him in hopeful love.

Somewhere a minister is telling himself, "I want to chuck this job and get into something with a better payoff; God knows my congregation has given me second-degree burnout." But he remembers the promise he made when he was ordained, and he sticks with the church in pastoral love.

Some people still make promises and keep those they make. When they do, they help make life around them more stably human. Promise keeping is a powerful means of grace in a time when people hardly depend on each other to remember and live by their word.

Some people still have ships they will not abandon, even when the ship seems to be sinking.

Some people still have causes they will not desert, even though the cause seems lost.

Some people have loved ones they will not forsake, even though they are a pain in the neck.

But why? Why make any promises at all? And if you do make them, why keep them? Why not tune in to growth and change and the maximizing of your feelings? Why worry about a word once spoken, or about a memory that binds you to that word? Promise keeping may be a sucker's game: sticking with what you stuck yourself with. That may be the surest way to becoming a loser. When you can move on to maximal pleasure and profit, why not cut the cords and let others pick up the pieces? Why make a promise, and why keep the promises you made?

The answer to the nettlesome whys of promise making is this, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*; U. of Chicago, 1958): the only way to overcome the unpredictability of your future is the power of promising. If forgiving is the only remedy for your painful past, promising is the only remedy for your uncertain future.

A human promise is an awesome reality. When a woman makes a promise, she thrusts her hand into the unpredictable circumstances of her tomorrow and creates an enclave of predictable reality. When a man makes a promise, he creates an island of certainty in a heaving ocean of uncertainty. Can any human act, other than the act of forgiving, be more divine?

Here is reason enough, then, to give some hard thought to the wonderworking power of promising. Maybe it is one lost key to the better society we all pray for.

I look at the mystery of human promising from three vistas: Human destiny is resting wholly on a promise; human freedom comes to its own only in a promise; and, human community can be saved only through the making and keeping of promises. Maybe, from these three vantage points (suggested to me by Paul Ford), we can rediscover a few dimensions of the wonderfully human event called a promise.

Questions to consider:

What is a promise someone has made to you? Did they keep it and how did that affect you?
What was a hard promise to keep and what resulted from that?

Human destiny rests on a promise

The future of the human family rides the fragile fibers of a promise spoken. One thing assures us that the cosmos will not climax its arduous odyssey turning itself into a stinking garbage heap. Only one thing affirms that the human romance will have a happy ending, and that the earth will be populated one day by a redeemed family living in justice and shalom. The one thread by which everything hangs is a promise spoken and not forgotten.

A common Chaldean named Abraham burned his bridges behind him and strode off into his unpredictable future as he gambled on the reliability of a promise uttered by a Presence he had scarcely begun to feel. And so the new possibility for history began.

The romance got going again when Moses tried to get a better fix on the identity of this Presence, this invisible Awesome One, the Ineffable. "What is your name?" he dared to ask. And the answer came (in John Courtney Murray's provocative translation): "I am he who will be there with you" (Exod. 3:14). This was his name. It was all Moses needed to know; maybe it was all he could know. "I am he who will be there with you; count on it."

No one on earth at that time could have predicted the spectacular rise and dismal falls of the people who were created by the promise implicit in God's name. Unpredictable circumstances combined with an uncontrolled compulsion to commit national suicide kept their future in constant doubt. Only the power of the promise kept them together. The One whose name is "I am he who will be there with you" kept coming back to them.

Then, in an unsuspecting setting, a man from Galilee talked to his friends about sealing the ancient promise in his blood and, a day later, he spilled it over God's ground on a mound they called Golgotha. "I am he who will be there with you" was there with us, dying, then rising, and then being there with us to the end of the world.

No one on earth now can predict the future of the natives of planet Earth by any evidential data. What will it be, a cosmic garbage heap? Or will it be a new earth where righteousness has finally taken hold? Not a cosmic heap, says Peter: rather, a new earth. How so? By whose crystal ball? According to what indicators, and from what internal evidence? With no crystal ball and no internal evidence, "We wait according to his promise" (II Peter 3:13). Again, the whole thing hangs on a promise.

The data from our own environment, natural or human, is ambiguous at best. James Gustafson published the first volume of his important work on ethics (*Ethics in a Theocentric Perspective*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), having given it, he tells us, 30 years of homework. In it he shares his melancholy judgment that nothing in nature assures him that nature is essentially friendly to the human species, and nothing disclosed in history confirms the hope that we are on a track leading to the City of God. We all have a humanoid bias that cosmic odds must be tilted in favor of the human race. But there is nothing solid to buttress the anthropocentric prejudice.

Nothing? Nothing at all—except one thing: a promise made by Someone whose name is "I am he who will be there with you."

there with you."

Human destiny rests on a promise freely given and reliably remembered. Besides providing a believing basis for hope, this means that whenever you and I make and keep a promise we are as close to being like God as we can ever be. When you say to anyone that you will be there with her, you are only a millimeter beneath the angels.

Questions to consider:

What promises has God kept in your life?

What are your thoughts on the phrase, "Whenever you and I make and keep a promise we are as close to being like God as we can ever be"?

Freedom comes alive in a promise

Whenever a mere human being makes a promise, he stakes a claim on freedom. A promise is a momentous claim that the person who makes it has the power to act freely to bring order and dependability into the unpredictable future. If you fear, as I do, our penchant for promise breaking, consider this: it is almost a miracle that anyone should ever dare to make a promise.

When we make a promise we take it on our feeble wills to keep a future rendezvous with someone in circumstances we cannot possibly predict. We take it on ourselves to create our future with someone else no matter what fate or destiny may have in store. This is almost ultimate freedom.

When I make a promise, I bear witness that my future with you is not locked into a bionic beam by which I was stuck with the fateful combinations of X's and Y's in the hand I was dealt out of my parents' genetic deck.

When I make a promise, I testify that I was not routed along some unalterable itinerary by the psychic conditioning visited on me by my slightly wacky parents.

When I make a promise I declare that my future with people who depend on me is not predetermined by the mixed-up culture of my tender years.

I am not fated, I am not determined, I am not a lump of human dough whipped into shape by the contingent reinforcement and aversive conditioning of my past. I know as well as the next person that I cannot create my life de novo; I am well aware that much of what I am and what I do is a gift or a curse from my past. But when I make a promise to anyone I rise above all the conditioning that limits me.

No German shepherd ever promised to be there with me. No home computer ever promised to be a loyal help, meet for the contemporary householder. Only a person can make a promise. And when he does, he is most free.

The paradox of promising is that we freely bind ourselves to keep the promises we make. We limit our freedom so that we can be free to be there with someone in his future's unpredictable storms. "The person who makes a vow," said Chesterton, "makes an appointment with himself at some distant time or place." And he gives up freedom in order to keep it.

When you make a promise, you tie yourself to other persons by the unseen fibers of loyalty. You agree to stick with people you are stuck with. When everything else tells them they can count on nothing, they count on you. When they do not have the faintest notion of what in the world is going on around them, they will know that you are going to be there with them. You have created a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability: you have made a promise that you intend to keep.

A promise, then, is the human essence of freedom after the style of God—it is your freedom to be there with someone even though you cannot tell what "being there" is going to be like for you.

The power of promise makes human community possible

We can have a human community only if persons within are able to keep the thread of their identity amid all their life's passages. A person, in the long run, gets this identity from the promises he makes. We know someone as the same person today that he or she was yesterday by the promises that person made yesterday and keeps today.

Some people ask who they are and expect their feelings to tell them. But feelings are flickering flames that fade after every fitful stimulus. Some people ask who they are and expect their achievements to tell them. But the things we accomplish always leave a core of character unrevealed. Some people ask who they are and expect visions of their ideal self to tell them. But our visions can only tell us what we want to be, not what we are.

Maybe we can best find out who and what we are by asking about the promises we have made to other people and the promises we are trying to keep for their sakes. Hannah Arendt is worth hearing out: "Without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each person's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities." Promise making is the social bond that tells us who we are in our life together.

Remember Thomas More? Meg, his beautiful daughter, begged him to save his life by renouncing an oath he had once made. All he had to do to save his skin was to go back on a vow. But to deny a vow is to deny oneself: "When a man takes an oath, Meg, he is holding his own self in his hand, like water. And if he opens his fingers then he needn't hope to find himself again."

But it is not only that I know myself in the mirror of my promises. My people, the ones who belong to me, who depend on me, also know me by the promises I have made. What I promise is what I am and will be to them. Only if they really know what I am can they live with me in trust. They know me in the important way, not by reading my analyst's notes, but by knowing my power to keep promises.

Everything in our lives together depends on the power of people to make and keep promises. To paraphrase Chesterton: "On that single string—of a person bound to his promise—hangs everything from nuclear disarmament to a family reunion, from a successful revolution to a return ticket to Pasadena."

Thomas Carlyle, toward the end of his three volumes on the history of the French Revolution, observes that the revolution did not fail because of a single and grievous error in the chambers of power, but because ordinary people in ordinary places stopped keeping their promises in their minor posts of ordinary responsibility.

Perhaps the church cannot be a force for redemptive change in our throwaway society until those of us who belong to it renew our commitment to promise in the society of the promise-making Lord. Evangelical social ethic? Of course, urgent! But let us not, in changing structures, forget the old job of nurturing each other to be people who dare to make promises and have the courage to keep the promises we make.

Promise making obviously begins with the intimate communities, and if we fail there, we can forget our covenants to renew the metropolis. Take marriage. When a woman marries, she takes on a new name: "I am she who will be there with you." What sublime arrogance; it sounds like an imitation of God. But we had better imitate the promise-making God. Or else.

When I married my wife, I had hardly a smidgen of sense for what I was getting into with her. How could I know how much she would change over 25 years? How could I know how much I would change? My wife has lived

with at least five different men since we were wed—and each of the five has been me. The connecting link with my old self has always been the memory of the name I took on back there: "I am he who will be there with you." When we slough off that name, lose that identity, we can hardly find ourselves again. And the bonds that connect us to others will be frayed to breaking.

Extend marriage to a family. What makes a family? A family must be more than a spillover of two persons' reckless passions. A family must be more than what the census bureau says it is: two or more persons related by blood and living under the same roof. A family has to be even more than a modern management device by which the oldsters are in charge of shuffling the youngsters around to the external experts who do the real rearing. A family must be more. And it is.

A family is a community created by the promise of two people who care for persons they bring into the world until those persons are able to care for themselves. Parents are people of promise. They remember their promise even when the family is a hotbed of anger, grief, and pain—as families tend sometimes to be. The psalmist said that the man who has a quiver full of children is the most happy fellow. I suspect he said it before his own children had reached adolescence. But no matter. A family is created and kept together, not because parenting is so much fun, but because two people dared to make and dared to keep their promise.

But a marriage and family are only the easiest communities to get into focus. All human community, from the ghetto to the global village, depends on the power of promising. Where people no longer have the inner daring to make serious promises or the grit to keep them, human community becomes a combat zone of competing self-maximizers. We are at sea; life is all open-ended, loose-jointed, tossed around in the backwash of unpredictability. Where others cannot assume that I will be there with them as promised, I have helped abolish community.

I oversimplify, of course.

There are promises we should never make. And there are some promises, once made, that nobody should keep.

The power of promise making is easily perverted. Like alcohol, promises can be put to silly and sinister uses. Besides, life gets so complicated, and we get so muddle-headed, that to keep one promise sometimes requires us to break another. We foul the lines, get our promises at sixes and sevens with each other, which is no surprise. To say that we ought to be careful when we make our promises only underscores the truth our generation has almost forgotten: a promise is a godlike thing, and it is the only human hold we have on our future.

A Time essay reminded us, not long ago, that not every word with the look of a promise should be seen as a real promise. There are snorts of political bravado that grandstanding candidates pass off as promises. ("I will never lie to the people.") There are heroic bluffs that humiliated generals theatricalize as promises. ("I shall return.") There are erotic exaggerations that romantic lovers gurgle as if they were making promises. ("I shall love you with undying passion.") There are fakes that remind us that somewhere there are real promises that people mean really to keep.

I do not pretend to understand all the psychic dynamics of promise making. And I know I need the grace and power of God to make promises these days. But I submit that the community of faith will do well to put the nurturing of promise-making and promise-keeping people high on its list of goals for the coming decade.

When we make and keep promises we are most of all like the God whose name is "I am he who will be there with you." Among all the dimensions of the mature person in Christ, none comes closer to the character of our Lord than the daring to make a promise and the courage to keep the promises we make.

When we make and keep a promise we are acting in the power that sets people free. If to be free in Christ is to be

free indeed, then to be free indeed is to be free to limit our freedom by promising to be there with the people who trust us.

Promises summon the sort of social integrity that lays the ground floor for all community. Life together survives as a human togetherness, not on a diet of warm feelings, but on the tough fibers of promise keeping. It is not easy. There are times when the inner logic and deserving needs of self-fulfillment seduce us to opt for self-maximizing even if to maximize ourselves we need to break promises to others. Promising—and keeping promises—is the toughest social duty of our time but, down the pike, it is the only human, the only redemptive way.

In my previous piece on forgiving and in this one on promising, I have been captivated by a two-directional power of grace in our living. As I search the pages of redemptive history for the moral essence of God's character, what comes to me is this: God is, par excellence, in the character he reveals, the One who creates for us a new past and a new future by forgiving and promising. And as I read the pages of human experience, I think I see here and there mere men and women sharing in God's life to this creative extent: they create a new past for themselves by forgiving people who have hurt them and they create a future for others by making promises to people who need them. As I see it, there are subtle miracles of human freedom. The neglect of them in our time may hasten disaster. Renewal of our power to practice them may yet save us.