What Meghan and Harry can and can’t escape

At the heart of life is the mess of being stuck with other people.

by Martha Tatarnic in the February 26, 2020 issue

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“I’ve been writing the same book my whole life,” says novelist Ann Patchett, “that you’re in one family, and all of a sudden, you’re in another family, and it’s not your choice, and you can’t get out.”

It’s a familiar thought. I live my life in the service and embrace of the church. I know something about how people get thrown together, how they find themselves challenged and their hearts opened as something gets patched together out of pieces that don’t necessarily fit. Those of us who choose church must negotiate the weird beauty of a community of people who end up together due to a whole range of needs and nudgings that make us want to draw closer to God. Wherever we may try to go, we don’t get to opt out of relationship with others.

I am a lifelong royal watcher. My growing-up years were framed by the Princess Diana saga, effectively curing me of any naive notion that being a princess meant living a fairy tale. Beyond the beauty and fashion, outside the happily ever after, what I have come to recognize in my love for the royals is that same familiarity I experience with Ann Patchett's books. I understand what it is they offer us, because it is something that I also receive in my life in the church.

I'm Canadian, and I appreciate that the countries of the Commonwealth can point to one person—the queen—as a symbol of our shared identity. That person represents something that is true of us as a people: we aren't actually united by our freedoms, our rights, our constitution, our governance structure, or even our ability to vote, although most of us would say these things are vitally important. We are united by a person.

Will Meghan and Harry find freedom? Or just a different set of restrictions?

That person, chosen through the accident of bloodline, is also connected to a family. Every time there is a scandal in the monarchy, the press wonders if maybe this will be the straw on the camel's back that finally breaks our attachment to the royals. In fact, family scandal more likely solidifies what the monarchy most powerfully means to us. At the heart of our personhood is the mess of what it is to be stuck with people—some of whom we chose, many of whom are with us through no choice of our own. At the heart of personhood is our brokenness—and our capacity for love.

Recently Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, announced their intention to step back from their responsibilities as senior members of the royal family. After some talk about what a "half in, half out" model of royal life might look like, a cleaner break has been identified instead as the way forward. Harry and Meghan will no longer be working members of the royal family, they will not formally represent the queen, they will not use their "royal highness" titles, and they will be weaned off public funding. They plan to build a new home in Canada and hope to continue to support projects that promote justice and equality in the world, even as they seek financial independence.

I don't question Harry and Meghan's decision, because no matter how many articles I read about it, I just don't know enough. I can only imagine what it might feel like to have all privacy taken away. I don't know the family dynamics within the palace, or whether this decision might be the healthiest one available. I can only guess at the

lingering trauma Harry feels over the death of his mother and how that might inform his efforts to protect his own wife and child. I see how Meghan has been subjected to racist bullying, and I can only support any stance against such toxicity.

What I do question is how Meghan and Harry's choice to leave the monarchy is being framed by the media as a pursuit of freedom. More and more, their exit looks instead like trading one set of restrictions for another. This might not be such a bad thing. Harry and Meghan haven't abdicated their desire to do good and make a difference. They therefore must make decisions about their security, and they must pick and choose how and when to invite the press into their private lives. They are beginning to vet commercial deals for whether or not they align with their values, and they will inevitably be navigating a whole new set of needs and expectations.

Most importantly, they will need family of some kind. In order to thrive, they will need to find their people. And as tempting as it will be for them to hand-select a new makeshift family, what would be luckier is if they can find the kind of community that simply happens: wherever we go, there relationships unavoidably are.

Across the ocean, meanwhile, is the family Harry and Meghan leave behind. While the royals decided it would be simpler to let them go entirely, they are also rediscovering—quite publicly—that their own roles and identities ride on a whole commonwealth of unruly diversity, of cobbled-together pieces that are in this together. The royals' inability to negotiate a welcoming space for a black American divorced princess compromises them as figureheads for what it means to find that, like it or not, we don't do this thing alone.

In so publicly negotiating the blessings and challenges of their relationships, the royal family may be offering us their greatest gift of all: a loud challenge to the individual self-actualization we are taught to value so highly. Matthew Townsend describes a "cult of self" at the heart of modern life: we are taught to "be self-made," to "get self-help," and to "attain self-absolution." This cult of self, however much it has been normalized, is based on a false premise. Our lives—biologically and spiritually—cannot exist in isolation. Personhood is fundamentally relational. The self exists as a complex interweaving of relationships, not an autonomous entity of its own making.

The physical premise of God's creation rests on our interconnectedness. God insists that we cannot exist in isolation.

Depending on our mindset, this can be threat or reassurance. In one of Jesus' most alarming parables, a rich man finds himself in a hell of his own making after a life in which he imagined he was not related to Lazarus, the desperate man living outside of his gateway. Jesus, too, struggles with the temptation to make it all about himself—from facing his demons in the wilderness, to the many crossroads where it clearly would have been so much easier to turn tail and choose a quieter, safer life. Instead, Jesus keeps turning back to the ragtag masses of people who follow him everywhere and telling them that they are connected to one another.

In doing so, Jesus reveals that true liberation is found in letting go of that relentless search for individual salvation and allowing yourself to be stuck with a salvation that must be negotiated in community. Allowing yourself to be stuck also means your salvation isn't riding on one fragile little life figuring it out alone, but rather on your participation in a hope that God is already enacting. It means you can expect not only that your little life will bear blessings for others, but also that others—even as sometimes you would rather close the gate on them—are going to bless you too.

This truth underwrites the newest royal saga. No matter where Meghan and Harry go, whatever embargos they set up against the media and whatever titles and public funding they do or don't receive, they will remain famous people tied to the British throne. Their pursuit of a different life and identity may well reflect the inescapable reality that stands in contradiction to the cult of self: you are part of a family. You might choose a different family, or get stuck with one. But there's no real exit route from the mess of relationship that we're in.

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