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Domestic Constitution Making

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02.01.2012 doi: 10.17176/20170804-102108



This season is a time to spend time with the family and to get on each other's nerves a lot.

But it is also a time to make resolutions for the new year. That is what we tried to do yesterday morning at the breakfast table: to decide how to get household chores done without me and my wife doing everything and our children, aged 10 and 8, nothing at all.

We went through four options, settling after all for a fifth one:

Option 1: Blunt Authority

Set the table! Empty the dishwasher! Bring down the rubbish! Not later! Now! And if you don't…

A non-starter, of course. We are a family of starry-eyed touchy-feely bleeding-heart consensus-enamored liberals. There is just no way I could utter the words "Because I say so!" without my kids rolling over with laughter, and myself, too.

We want our kids to do what they do because they are free persons, consenting in what they open-mindedly conceive as a fair distribution of burden and benefit, happily taking up their share, not because they face sanctions otherwise but because they proudly exert their freedom to do the right thing.

Option 2: Distributive Justice

Paul sets the table. Theresa clears it. Paul empties the rubbish bin. Theresa takes up the occasional errand to the grocery store.

We hardly got that far before the discussion was drowned in yells of discontent: It's UNFAIR!! The rubbish bin job is yucky! But shopping takes a lot more time! One job of table-clearing is worth more than one of table-setting! Yeah, but less than two!

This clearly wouldn't do. All this balancing and bargaining and begrudging, with a pinched mouth and a bitter heart, this is just not what we are! A family is not about maximizing one's self-interest, is it? We are not an investment bank. This is about the common good: The proud task of furthering the familial well-being has to be shouldered by each and every one of us in equal portions. And it's more fun all together, too!

Option 3: Equality

Whatever needs to be done, all members of the family instantly will congregate to do it, regardless of individual preoccupations, predilections and engagements.

We took a moment to ponder about the implications of this majestically just rule.

Theresa felt uneasy because she likes to read before dinner. To pull her out of her books to make her help setting the table seemed much more of a demand for her than for her brother who usually bounces

around the table anyway, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the food. On the other hand, Paul has a hard time to sit at the table up to the end of the meal, so we often let him run to his room while we finish our grown-up conversation, and by the time the table needs to be cleared Paul is already deeply immersed in his Lego…

What killed option 3, though, was this: Kids have a way of lagging when they have to do something they don't want to. To round them up for every little task in the household would take such desperate amounts of time that normally it would be much easier to do the damned thing oneself. Which is pretty much what we do now anyway.

Option 4: Mutual Trust

Whoever is around will do what needs to be done, trusting that everybody else does the same and all inequality will even out in the long run.

This one we liked a lot. A social contract, a mutual promise of fairness disregarding all the petty particularities of how much our individual profit or loss would be – that's what we needed! No nit-picking distributive rules for us. We are free people, ready to face our responsibilities, prepared to give a helping hand if we can easily afford it, all the more generous by the certainty that in the hour of need we will be spared.

Theresa can read right up to the call for dinner, and Paul can tinker away with his Lego unbothered afterwards. I sternly reminded them that they would inevitably feel the temptation to take advantage and run away to feign some occupation in the hope that the other would do the job in the meantime. Such freeloading, I warned them, would immediately make this beautiful rule collapse. They both nodded earnestly their heads.

But, Theresa chimed in, woudn't this rule imply that Paul always sets the table and she always clears it? Isn't dealing with dirty plates a much harder job than dealing with clean plates? So, how fair is that?

Option 5: Mutual Trust, with one exception

This is what we finally settled for: We basically go for option 4, but as to the job of clearing the table, everyone will put away his/her own plate, and if he/she doesn't it's just going to stay there until the next meal, all dirty and yucky, and then you have it.

My wife doesn't like the idea of dirty plates on the table all day very much. But she didn't want to reopen the negociations, so she reluctantly agreed to it in the end.

So this is how we go into the year of 2012.

Wish us luck.

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SUGGESTED CITATION
Steinbeis, Maximilian: Domestic Constitution Making, Verfassungsblog, 02.01.2012, doi: 10.17176/20170804-102108.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20170804-102108.