**Partners in Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

It was a lazy Tuesday evening, which meant discount night at my local movie theater. So, like many others this summer, I went to see “Barbie.”

There has been no shortage of opinions about the film since it debuted on the silver screen in July. I read very little of that commentary. Indeed, I was so ill informed about the movie that, unlike many of my fellow theatergoers, I did not realize that wearing bright pink to the theater was the unwritten etiquette.

I think I wore dark grey that evening. After the fact, that seemed to me a more apt wardrobe choice because I found the movie to be a profoundly depressing take on relationships between men and women.

In the movie, Barbie is torn between two worlds. In the brightly colored fantasy world of “Barbie Land,” women dominate the landscape. These chipper, confident beings rule the land – while those who are less than perfect play bit parts on the periphery of their world. All the levers of civic power are controlled by women who gloat in their worldly might. Meanwhile, the men of Barbie Land are presented as vain, idle buffoons of no importance and little sense. They lounge on the beach living the life of eternal boys.

However, when Barbie travels to the so-called “Real World,” the tables are turned. Men in that world are presented as power-hungry, greedy bullies. They lack respect for women of all ages and every status. In their words and actions, they demonstrate a deeply misogynistic view of the world.

What I found to be so troubling was the portrayal of men and women as antagonists in a perennial, zero-sum struggle for power and importance rather than as partners who need each other. In the images on screen, either women were the winners or men were the winners, but there was no world in which both could work together in their own unique ways.

I fear, sometimes, that this perspective is not merely limited to the frothy movies of summertime. For example, I see it when I shop for children’s clothing and see shirts emblazoned with “Girl Power,” or “Girls Rule” – and in the counterparts for boys. These messages may be well-intended attempts to encourage self-respect in a world that can, too often, tear young people down. Yet, I fear that this too fuels the view that someone must always have “power,” or “rule,” or “win” at the expense of another.

I hope that, among other conversations that “Barbie” might spark, some attention might be paid to whether or not things have to be this way. It may be the way things play out on the movie screen or in the high stakes battles of politics, business, fame and fortune.

Yet, in everyday life, I see men and women who, in the ordinariness of life, are partners who do not view every challenge as a battle to be won but as a burden to be born together. They do not see every joy as a prize to be grasped at but as a blessing to be shared.

I see sisters and brothers joining forces to care for elderly parents. I see professional men and women running businesses and leading institutions with respect and mutual support. I see male and female religious communities bringing their own unique charisms to a world with deep material and spiritual hungers. They do not fight over who feeds that hunger, caring only that it is fed.

I see grandmothers and grandfathers each sharing their own unique perspectives on their familial legacies with future generations. I see students supporting each other in study groups without unhealthy competition between the men and women in the group. I see symphony orchestras that know the musicians are not banded together to dominate and drown each other out, but to collaborate to make something more beautiful than each could make on his or her own.

In its most profound way, I see husbands and wives live decades of married life keeping the vow to “love, honor and cherish” each other in a life of mutual self-giving and often profound self-sacrifice.

I am not naïve. I know that in the depths of human sinfulness and pride, men and women have not and do not always offer each other the respect and support that they should.

However, I also know the beauty of a loving Holy Family with *both* Mary and St. Joseph. I knew the good that has come from centuries of those who have followed in the footsteps trod by *both* St. Francis and St. Claire on the hills of Assisi. I know the great Benedictine communities who are the heirs of *both* St. Benedict and his sister, St. Scholastica. I know that the faith of St. Therese of Liseuex was nourished by *both* of her holy parents, Louis and Zelie Martin, the first married couple to be canonized together.

They, and so many through the centuries, offer an alternative to a view that men and women must constantly be in tension with each other, with a winner and a loser every time. They call us to see each other as partners in ordinary times.

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