

AN OLIVE LEAF

BY SIMPLE LOVE AND NEED

By Elouise Bell

The “guaranteed to make you smile” reflection that follows is excerpted from Elouise Bell’s essay, “Family Status,” in her book, *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 90–94.

IN THE MAIL the other day, I received a form to be filled out. It was from one of the growing number of organizations that keep tabs on me, and they wanted their files updated. In addition to name, address, teeth count, and other vital statistics, the form had one item that stopped me dead in mid-scribble, I must admit. It read: FAMILY STATUS _____.

Of course we’re all familiar with the “Marital Status” blank on forms—or even, on bureaucracy’s off-days, “Marital Status.” (To which I crisply reply, “Armed and ready!”) There is an easy spectrum—single-married-widowed-divorced—to pick from for the “marital status” slot, though I’m not at all convinced that those four exhaust the possibilities. (I understand that on the West Coast now, some data sheets ask you to specify the name of “Spouse or Significant Other,” abbreviated S.O.)

But how do you answer a question that wants a one-word response to “family status?” What do you say? “Intact?” “Dispersed?” “Eating me out of house and home?” How do you define your “status” in your family? Think of the possible answers there: “Still considered the baby of the family at 45.” “Barely tolerated.” “One rung ahead of the dog, as nearly as I can tell.”

Perhaps the question really means to ask about family make-up, such as who’s in your family and why. If that’s the question, they really need to provide more than a two-inch line for the response. I understand that the matter of who constitutes a family nearly shipwrecked the National Conference on Families earlier this year. One group kept talking about “the family?”; another group insisted that it was more appropriate to speak of “families,” taking into account what varied assortments of people consider themselves families. Jane Howard, author of the best-selling book, *A Different Woman*, came out with a second book titled *Families*, which she might well have



called *Different Families*. In it, she makes the point that today family groups are determined by many factors in addition to genealogy and biology. . . .

Does every “real” family have children? Or can we rather say that the crucial feeling is one of connecting up with the on-going generations of the human race, feeling a part of the larger Family by holding or romping with those who are where we have been, who are coming up to where we are. Doesn’t the belonging come through being involved, whether by blood or adoption or association or career or volunteer service or the most informal kind of neighborhood dynamics, with the next link in the chain? Some people who bear or beget children lack such a feeling; many without children have it nevertheless.

Is a family necessarily “incomplete” (or “broken” as we often callously call it) if there is one parent instead of two? The history of early Utah is a record of countless one-parent families, mothers raising large numbers of children with only occasional short visits from fathers shared with other families and with church duties. Sometimes these strong, nurturing pioneer families included aunts and sister-wives, live-in cousins, and children who became unequivocal family members not by birth or formal adoption but by simple love and need. . . .

BEYOND the needs of basic comfort and safety, it doesn’t matter whether a home is a hut or a hogan, or a mansion or a condo, only that within its walls we feel secure and cherished. It doesn’t matter if the hand that pushes the stroller or the porch swing belongs to a man or a woman, only that it extends tenderness and an abundance of touching. It doesn’t really matter if there’s a big chair, a middle-sized chair, and a teeny-weeny chair, only that the people who sit in those chairs pull them around to face each other for hours of free, open-hearted, on-going talk.

Oh, by the way, about that question on the form that asked for my FAMILY STATUS. In the blank, after much deliberation, I wrote, “Fine!”