

# Fragmented Families and Splintered Classes

## *Why So Much Churning? What Can be Done? What Will America Come to Look Like?*

A SYMPOSIUM



Randy Ahlm, Paul D. Allick, Jon Bacal, Mike Benson, Barry Casselman, Chuck Chalberg, Larry Colson, Laurence D. Cooper, Edward P. Ehlinger, Arvonne Fraser, Paul J. Gessing, Steve Gottwalt, Pete Hegseth, Phyllis Kahn, John R. LaPlante, David Lapp and W. Bradford Wilcox, George Liebmann, Matt Lindstrom, Wilfred M. McClay, Bryce McNitt, Rhonda Kruse Nordin, Bruce Peterson, Todd Peterson, Larry Purdy, Jeremiah Reedy, Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, Deborah L. Ruf, Terrence Scanlon, Nelson Smith, David J. Theroux, Scott Uzzle, Jim Van Houten, Lou Wangberg, Stephen B. Young

Introduction by Mitch Pearlstein

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### A SYMPOSIUM

#### Introduction

**Mitch Pearlstein**  
*Founder & President*

This new American Experiment symposium grows out of a book of mine published just about a year ago, *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation*, which examined many of the problems and shortcomings resulting from very high rates of nonmarital births, very high rates of divorce, and routinely short-lived cohabiting relationships. One of the book's central themes is how such family churning—more specifically, the extent to which it hurts great numbers of children—is leading, and can *only* lead, to stunted mobility and deeper class divisions in a nation that has never viewed itself in such splintered ways.

The United States has the highest family fragmentation rates in the industrial world: Nonmarital births for the nation as a whole are about 40 percent, with proportions dramatically higher in many communities defined by race, ethnicity, or geography. Divorce rates, while moderating in recent decades, are still estimated at about 40 percent for first marriages and 50 percent for second ones. Cohabiting rates, moreover, have exploded, adding further to the instability of relationships.

Yet as injurious as these numbers are, entwined are the many ways in which worldwide economic changes are making it more imperative than ever for men and women to have solid, marketable skills *at the very same and ongoing moment that high family breakdown rates are stunting the academic achievement of immense numbers of young people.*

Yet while *From Family Collapse to America's Decline* argues that all this portends a not-pretty picture for our country down not-distant roads, it doesn't spend much time speculating in any detailed way about how such a picture might eventually look. It doesn't spend much time, in other words, imagining the many specific and high prices to be paid by a more demarcated America. Delving into matters like these is the objective of a new book I'm just starting, and in an unabashed attempt to get a few dozen smart men and women to help me think them through, I asked them to address questions like these:

- How might abridged mobility and starker class divisions play out for lower-income and minority men, women, and, in particular, children? What will it mean for their prospects?
- What about the commonweal itself? In what centrifugal ways might all this play out in the nation? In Minnesota?



- And getting to the core, what can be done to reduce out-of-wedlock births and divorce measurably in the first place?

The good news is that this symposium (we produce about one a year) is exceptionally rich in analyses of how we've come to this juncture. Moreover, given how commentators in various settings are often quicker to devote more time and thought to why something is broken rather than suggesting compelling ways of fixing it, these 34 pieces (by 36 writers) are well-supplied with proposed remedies.

If there is any less-good news, it's that most participants were hesitant to speculate with any specificity about the future, and as just noted, instead focused on our current rock- and divot-filled landscape and what should be done about it. In fairness, I surely see how elusively difficult envisioning tomorrow can be, as witness the fact that a large purpose of this publication is borrowing and cribbing insights that I don't have myself. Still, and by far, this is an invaluable collection, as it attacks head-on powerfully important issues that are routinely sidestepped all over our state and nation. My thanks to all its contributors, men and women of varied viewpoints, right to left, from Minnesota and across the country.

With that as prologue, what follows is a sampling of arguments.

Two symposiasts who do, in fact, write provocatively about what the future holds are Lawrence Cooper of Carleton College and Wilfred McClay of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Professor Cooper writes of the possibility "however remote" of the "emergence of a powerful, organized, *illiberal* political movement." While such a movement has never seriously threatened to succeed in the United States, current and projected rates of family fragmentation are also unprecedented. "America may be exceptional," he argues, "but Americans aren't exempt from the needs and tendencies of human nature." The basic point to be made, he continues, is "not that family breakdown leads to

illiberal politics," but rather that family fragmentation "does tend to lead to a pervasive sense of frustration and grievance and therewith humiliation. These unhappy sentiments can create fertile ground for illiberal politics."

"There is no mystery," Professor McClay writes, "about the relationship between intact, two-parent families and academic attainment; and there is no mystery about the relationship between academic attainment and employment prospects and, therefore, upward mobility. There really is no way to escape the consequences of these things, which have been long in coming, or to do much more than blunt their impact through social programs that themselves will prove unsustainable." Concluding, he writes, "If our politics seem ugly now, just wait until strapped state and local governments begin to renegotiate many of their most basic commitments, as they almost certainly will have to do."

As one might imagine, differences between liberals and conservatives regarding the very origins and nature of the issues we're talking about can be large.

Writing from the left side of the aisle, Edward Ehlinger, Minnesota's commissioner of health, argues that the "essential question is, how can we alter the social and economic circumstances that limit the choices of people of color and lower-income individuals to unhealthy alternatives? Once we acknowledge that it is poverty, hunger, homelessness, joblessness, income inequality, illiteracy, poor schools, violence, decaying neighborhoods, segregation, and various forms of injustice, including bigotry and racism, that limit the choices of individuals, we will be closer to the right questions."

DFL State Rep. Phyllis Kahn, who has contributed to a number of American Experiment symposia, for which I'm grateful, writes that since Minnesota's "economic future needs a large component of intellectual activity-based industry," and that of the "increasing cost of higher education and the problem of paying the resultant debt are additional causes of

stress for families and individuals,” totally free higher education for all might well be a good idea. This would cost, she estimates, about \$1.5 billion annually, or about nine percent of the total state annual general fund budget of \$17.3 billion. Less expensively, she also suggests just stopping all tuition increases at the University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. Or, less costly still, she has introduced legislation to let “students pay college debt by a tax credit on income earned by working in Minnesota after graduation.”

Interpretations by conservatives are much more likely to focus on culture. “Politics,” Chuck Chalberg writes, “isn’t everything,” but “culture often is,” with culture, in turn, trumping politics and buttressing economics. In similar spirit (in both senses of the term), Chalberg, who teaches history at Normandale Community College in Bloomington, suggests how it would be a salutary thing, when it comes to matters of family breakdown, if a modern-day John Wesley were to sweep through much of the country, not just through our inner city and poorest communities.

Diagnoses and prescriptions from the right also regularly include strictures about government doing too much, and in so doing, making things worse. Along with Representative Kahn, Mike Benson is a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives. His take, though, on what government can do and should do takes a different turn. “During my short time in the legislature,” he writes, “I have come to realize that the consequences of the policies legislated over the last 50 years, albeit with good intent, have in many ways contributed to the demise of the family structure. We have enabled people to dismiss what were previously accepted norms of responsibility. In far too many homes, the state’s programs have come to replace the male father as the source of income and male role modeling and to dismiss the importance of male leadership, emotional support, and faith modeling needed for a healthy family structure.”

Focusing on and celebrating the invaluable role of the private sector, as conservatives have been known to do, Terrence Scanlon of the Washington-based Capitol Research Center, writes of on-the-ground

nonprofits and the against-the-grain philanthropies that support them. “Perhaps the most successful example of such work,” he writes, “was ‘First Things First,’ a Chattanooga nonprofit created after a group of Tennessee businessmen decided that they had to do something about the city’s high rates of teen pregnancy, divorce, and fatherlessness.”

Then there are contributors who challenge notions of both right and left in regards to fragmentation. What’s needed, George Liebmann of the Calvert Institute in Maryland writes, are “Premarital counseling, child tax credits, other tax policies that do not penalize part-time employment, work programs and payroll tax preferences for the young, distance learning, ceilings on student loans, a preference for domestic rather than foreign adoptions, and the removal of all aspects of family policy from the naïve and easily influenced federal courts.” This, he notes, is “not the agenda of liberals, the Tea Party, or the so-called Religious Right.”

As one might imagine, weaving through many of the essays are assertions about the importance of education for breaking free. Nelson Smith, formerly president of the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, writes, “I line up with people who think education solves poverty, rather than being precluded by it. As an advocate for charter schools, I’ve seen plenty of evidence that intense, mission-driven schools can improve achievement dramatically among low-income students, many from disintegrated households. Those kids should be the focus.”

Several writers had intriguing things to say about thrift, an essential notion, albeit not one often mentioned in discussions of fragmentation. David Lapp of the New York-based Institute for American Values and W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia-based National Marriage Project refer to research by Utah State’s Jeffrey Dew when they jointly write about how newlyweds with “substantial consumer debt are less happy in their marriages over time.” Contrastingly, newly married couples “who paid off consumer debt early in their marriages were more likely to report happy marriages years down the road.” Other research, they

note, shows that only infidelity, along with alcohol and drug abuse, are “more powerful predictors of divorce than the perception that one’s spouse has spent money foolishly.”

Perhaps the most frequently cited portion of Charles Murray’s latest, once-again seminal book, *Coming Apart*, comes a page from the end when he says a large part of the issues at hand “consists of nothing more complicated than our unwillingness to say out loud what we believe. A great many people, especially in the new upper class, just need to start preaching what they practice.” Several symposiasts write in a similar vein, including Paul Allick, an Episcopal parish priest in the Twin Cities, who had recently attended a church meeting in which a social service agency had shown a video about a family it had helped get settled in a new home.

“The family,” Allick writes, “consisted of a very young mother and two children. There was never any mention of a father. There was nothing said about the mother’s employment status. We were told that these families end up this way because the poverty rate is increasing. They were in this situation because others are greedy and uncaring. This did not make sense to me.”

Nevertheless, Allick found himself “keeping silent out of fear of sounding mean or being accused of blaming the victim,” thereby not asking (though he wanted to) about the father, or about whether the family was part of a faith community, or about the woman’s extended family. “Those of us,” he sums up, “who see the problems existing and worsening have a responsibility to say something.”

Then there are intriguing conceptions and important proposals that don’t fit neatly into any particular category, at least none of those above. Here are but three.

Bruce Peterson, a Hennepin County District judge, argues, “Cultural norms have long recognized that a young man who marries and fathers children has an entirely new lifestyle expected of him. That has not necessarily been the case for unmarried fathers . . .

I have been discussing with some fathers’ advocates the development of a ‘Commitment to Parenting’ ritual for unmarried parents that would have the same solemnity as a marriage ceremony and would give new parents a chance to pledge publicly their total support to their child and their parenting relationship.”

Granted, this idea does not speak directly to re-institutionalizing marriage and might even be interpreted as acquiescing to its demise in many communities. Yet I can see how it could help many children.

Larry Purdy, a Vietnam war veteran and Minneapolis attorney, proposes compulsory national service for every qualified citizen. He acknowledges that his is “not a popular idea with colleagues across the ideological spectrum, but that doesn’t mean it won’t work.”

How might it actually help? According to Purdy, just one way would be in exposing citizens to America’s consensus core values. “To the extent any of these virtues—say, industriousness and honesty, along with strong marriages reinforced by positive religious practices—are seen as leading to more successful societal outcomes, every participant would more than likely be influenced by them.”

One of the bottom lines of Rhonda Kruse Nordin’s recommendations and admonitions is that “parents do a better job masterminding the imprint from which our children base their own love stories.” By this she means, “Each of us has a marriage imprint built upon the marriage of our parents. We, as parents, are our children’s imprint for intimacy. Based on what children see in the marriage relationship, they draw conclusions and form permanent beliefs and expectations about marriage.”

This imprint, as one might expect, “shapes a child’s personality, choices, relationships, and lifetime experiences and does more to influence a child’s long-term well-being than any other one factor.” More broadly, decisions made by mothers and fathers, be they married or not, don’t reside only at home but

instead ripple through society, sculpting the love lives of not just their own kids. Ms. Nordin is a writer in the Twin Cities and a resource for parents and others in strengthening families.

A few final points, if I may.

You may notice that different writers use different statistics when it comes to marriage, divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and the like. This is to be expected, as there are a lot of data out there from a lot of different sources. Suffice it to say, what's important for our purposes are not necessarily their perfect consistency but rather their rounded girth.

In addition to saluting our three dozen writers once more, my great thanks to Senior Fellow Kent Kaiser, who doubles and triples in the academic and other roles he plays, including having copy-edited (I do believe) every annual installment of this symposium series. And doing so particularly beautifully this time around (which would have been a sentence fragment he certainly would have caught if I hadn't added this appendage). Big thanks also to Peter Zeller, Britt Drake, and other American Experiment colleagues, as one way or another, just about everyone winds up involved in projects like these.

Especially because problems of family fragmentation and often disintegration are less than conducive to sunny or expectant takes on matters, an encouraging way to close is with the help of G. K. Chesterton, the Englishman of many letters, as quoted by Chuck Chalberg in his essay. "Hope," Chesterton wrote, "means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all."

With that, and as always, we welcome your comments.

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## Setting the Best Example I Can

by *Randy Ahlm*

Mitch Pearlstein's book *From Family Collapse to America's Decline* does a wonderful job of articulating the outcomes associated with family breakdown. Others such as Juan Williams and Bill Bennett have been making the same points for years, and I often catch myself evangelizing about the same points to my liberal friends: Go to school, take accountability, treat people with respect, and so on.

Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter said, after several flash mobs had terrorized the citizens of his city in 2001, "Take those God-darn hoodies down, especially in the summer, pull your pants up and buy a belt, 'cause no one wants to see your underwear or the crack of your butt. You walk into somebody's office with your hair uncombed and a pick in the back and your shoes untied and your pants half down, tattoos up and down your arms and on your neck, and you wonder why somebody won't hire you? They don't hire you 'cause you look like you're crazy. You have damaged your own race."

While Nutter was generally speaking to black kids, he may just as well have been speaking to white kids, too. I see just as many of them walking around with hoodies, pants falling off their rear ends, and tattoos all over. It's really not a race issue. Is it a class division issue and part of the mobility problem that Mitch asked us to write about? Maybe, but it strikes me that it's an issue of individual accountability that we have, as parents, to raise our children with the right set of values and expectations.

Several years ago, I was struggling with how I could move the conservative movement forward. I could spend money on issue-related campaigns (which I do), get involved with conservative groups (which I did), lead efforts to elect candidates (checked that box in 2004), or occasionally write essays to move the discussion forward. All were interesting and fun, but I realized that the most impactful thing I could do for the conservative movement was to raise my children to live their lives with the conservative



values of individual accountability and equality of opportunity.

I could teach them to believe in God, treat their elders with respect, always give 100 percent at whatever they do, go to class, do their homework, and so on, while also setting a good example for them along the way so that they would, in turn, raise their children (my grandchildren) with the same values. I figured if I did all of these things, my boys would have a pretty good chance of not becoming one of the statistics Mitch writes about in his book. This is not meant as a presumptuous lecture to others on how they should raise their children, because, in fact, while my two sons are growing into fine young men, it's true that I can't guarantee anything, nor do I really know what will happen to them in the next several years.

In my final personal analysis, class division, breakdown of marriage, and fatherless children are not something I can do anything about, because it's not up to me how others raise their children. Is it really up to me to ensure that other kids graduate from high school? Is it really my fault that some fathers abandon their children? Can I really stop kids from having babies when they are teenagers? The answer is no.

I regret that I can't offer some brilliant policy or new program that will reduce family breakdown and all the problems associated with it. What I can do is focus on my own family and set the best example I can. When I make mistakes, I can confess and try to do better. I can set a high standard of expectations for my children and teach them that there are consequences for the decisions they make, just as my father taught me.

*Randy Ahlm is president and CEO of Spectrum Plastics Group headquartered in Minneapolis.*

## A Responsibility to Say Something

*by Paul D. Allick*

One approach to address the increase in out-of-wedlock births and divorce is for those of us who are civic and religious leaders to start speaking up. We must start talking about values. We must teach about dignity, generosity, honor, and discipline. I am not convinced that this approach will totally reverse these disturbing trends, but it is worth trying.

As I look at our cultural landscape, it seems that values are no longer taught or even discussed. When we do discuss poverty, it is only in the context of materialism. We are no longer comfortable looking at the spiritual and social issues involved in a life of poverty.

Recently, I attended a church meeting where one of our social agencies was showing a video about a family it had recently helped get settled in a new home. The family consisted of a very young mother and two children. There was never any mention of a father. There was nothing said about the mother's employment status. We were told that these families end up this way because the poverty rate is increasing. They were in this situation because others are greedy and uncaring. This did not make sense to me.

I found myself keeping silent out of fear of sounding mean or being accused of blaming the victim. I wanted to ask about the father. I wanted to ask if this family was part of a faith community. I wanted to ask how their extended family might have helped in this situation. I wanted to ask if the mother had been able to find employment.

On a more general level, I wanted to ask if the rise in the poverty rate had anything to do with the rise in out-of-wedlock births. I wanted to wonder aloud if part of the struggle for many families of all classes results, in part, from a breakdown in a shared value system.

I asked none of those questions. If I had, we might have begun an important conversation—one that



might really lead to helping people out of poverty.

I was raised in the 1970s and '80s. My parents divorced when I was two years old. Both of my parents remarried, and I became part of two large stepfamilies. Both families had their share of problems with alcoholism, unemployment, poverty, and more divorces. Yet in the end, all of us kids, with one exception due to mental illness, turned out to be productive and respectable citizens. Out-of-wedlock births and divorce also have been the exception.

I can name many reasons for why we turned out all right. Our parents watched us like hawks. We could not get away with much. We had two sets of parents watching us—our fathers were intimately involved in our lives. We did things together as a family. We raised animals, traveled, fished, and hunted together. We ate supper together every evening. Our parents never let us sit in the house in front of the television; we were regularly rounded up and sent outside to play. We did not attend church as much as we could have, but our parents told us about God and prayed with us. Our parents never took our side against a teacher who disciplined us.

As we became teenagers, our parents expected us to have jobs. No job was ever demeaned; work had its own dignity.

Our parents talked to us about history and politics, even though none of them had an education beyond high school. The evening news was on every night before dinner, and we actually discussed and debated what we had seen.

We cannot force families to live this way, but we can start teaching these values in our communities. These are not liberal values or conservative values. They are commonsense values. These values can help raise healthy productive children, whether they are raised by a single parent, step-parents, or parents of the same gender.

This all makes me sound like a crabby old man, but I am not that old. But I am old enough to know that in my lifetime something has shifted in our

value system. In a noble effort to be more inclusive and tolerant, we seem to have left off having any expectations or boundaries. What I learned as a child was taught to me by my parents, step-parents, older siblings, and our extended family. This leads me to wonder if the problem is the composition of the family system or the lack of values being transmitted to the next generation.

Those of us who see the problems existing and worsening have a responsibility to say something.

*The Reverend Paul D. Allick is parish priest in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota.*

## Learning Launch Pads

*by Jon Bacal*

Evidence mounts that social mobility is slowing for Americans trapped in poverty, with lifelong consequences for millions of children. Most live in single-parent homes and don't obtain an education enabling them to escape poverty. What should be done? We should act on the evidence that it is within our reach to provide vulnerable children with learning launch pads—effective new and transformed schools—to change their and America's trajectory. While we still don't know how to repair families, we're learning much about creating schools at scale.

The link between learning and life outcomes is indisputable. A new Pew study found that half of children raised in poverty who don't earn a college degree are stuck in poverty as adults, compared to only ten percent who do earn a college degree. Having a college degree quadruples the odds of rising from poverty to the top of the wealth ladder. Even graduating high school (a milestone attained by fewer than half of Minneapolis black and Latino students), working full time, and waiting until age 21 and marrying before having a baby reduce to two percent the odds of being in poverty, according to Isabel Sawhill and Ron Haskins of the Brookings



Institution. Those who miss all three of these success milestones raise to 74 percent their odds of being poor.

Thirty years after *A Nation at Risk* was published and a decade after No Child Left Behind was passed into law, there is mixed evidence that top-down demands for existing schools to do better yield life trajectory-altering improvement for poor children at scale. Recent data points from efforts to create or remake schools to meet the learning challenges of today's students are more promising.

*The New Orleans Model.* Before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans schools were a national punch line. Six years later, the proficiency gap between students in New Orleans and their peers statewide had been cut in half (from 23 percent in 2007 to ten percent in 2011). By contrast, the proficiency gap between Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools and their statewide peers remained 18 percent in both years. In a city where 80 percent of students now attend charter schools, New Orleans charters are three times more likely than charters nationwide to do significantly better than traditional schools (48 percent versus 17 percent as measured by The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University). These numbers represent transformed prospects for tens of thousands of children, nearly all raised in disadvantaged, single-parent homes.

What changed? A recent Public Impact report noted New Orleans put in place sound public oversight systems and intentionally recruited a citywide supply of strong teachers, leaders, board members, and charter school entrepreneurs and networks. A failing bureaucratic monopoly was replaced with a dynamic, self-improving entrepreneurial ecosystem in half a decade. Still a work in progress, New Orleans shows the potential for civic leadership and aligned state policies to yield dramatic citywide improvement. It needn't take a hurricane to replicate the model in other cities.

*Actionable Research.* Scholar John Hattie is the author of the world's largest evidence-based study of the factors affecting student learning. His 2008

*Visible Learning* synthesizes over 800 meta-analyses of 50,000 studies across 80 million students globally to identify the impact of each factor on student achievement. Hattie's findings strongly suggest that teacher-related, school-supported variables such as expectations, clarity, feedback, teacher beliefs in the malleability of intelligence, and growth (vs. fixed) mindsets are together far more influential drivers of student learning than a student's family or other background characteristics.

The number one factor, equivalent to students making learning gains three times above average: students becoming "assessment-capable learners" who know their learning goals, know how they are doing in relation to their goals, and know how to reach their goals. Note that Hattie's high-yield interventions require no additional resources and are within reach of many and, eventually, most teachers and schools. A caveat: research does not answer the question of what works with finality. Rather, it suggests that, like scientists and entrepreneurs, educators must become seekers of evidence and strivers for rapid improvement and adaptation—in other words, purposeful learners and innovators, driven by a sense of urgency that lives are on the line. Another example: the medical profession depends on the relentless pursuit and practice of evidence, improvement and innovation. There is much for education to learn here, and the stakes are equally high.

The fact that most existing schools serving fragile American children haven't implemented ever-more-effective practices need not predict the ability of different, new and transformed schools to do so. The recent rise of online, on-site blended learning might just provide the catalyst for rapid change. The explosion in online content and digital tools is reducing the cost of online learning to near zero, enhancing the ability of on-site teachers and students to share feedback, track progress, and iterate in real-time, freeing teachers to provide the personalized coaching and social-emotional support that vulnerable children need.

Improving learning is not only the most promising game changer for disadvantaged children. Given the

link between quality education and economic and civic prosperity, it is the precondition for generating the wealth required to address our common challenges.

In the late 19th century, effective public health practices and habits took decades to take hold, but after they did, average life expectancies doubled. For our children's sake, let's hope America and Minnesota will act with more urgency to improve learning.

*Jon Bacal is leading the launch of Venture Academies, a blended learning charter secondary network planning to open its first school in Minneapolis next year.*

## Reinforcements Needed

*by Mike Benson*

As a young lad in the early 1960s, I remember listening to my grandparents' stories about growing up and raising large families through two world wars and the Great Depression. Considering the struggles of American families, I am astonished by how my grandparents were able not just to overcome but prosper through such adversity. They spoke of how, very early in life, they needed to work several jobs just to provide for the family's basics. There were no safety nets like welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, or rent subsidies.

However poor or even desperate their conditions seemed to be they spoke of their experiences with a certain pride. Those times made them more appreciative of their current circumstances, and they possessed an indelible belief that through perseverance and hard work people could become or achieve anything they set their sights on. Over and over in their narrative, they emphasized three essential elements to their successes: faith, hard work, and family.

What I heard from my grandparents was a story shared by millions of Americans until the 1960s.

Even though there certainly were vast differences in prosperity between the classes during that time in our history, as there are today, there was a shared cultural belief in the three essential elements.

The time between 1960 and 2010 brought great change. Science and technology have transformed every area of our lives, mostly for the positive, but the shared story has all but disappeared as the generation who told it has passed. The cultural revolution of the 1960s and social policies of the last 50 years have yielded vastly different social, economic, and family structures.

The gap between economic classes has widened and recently erupted into a level of class envy not seen for decades. A number of factors have contributed to this alarming trend, but one factor seems to leap ahead of the others: the change in the family structure.

In 1960, approximately 90 percent of white adults were married; by 2010, the rate had dropped to only about 50 percent. Upper-middle-class white adults were married at a rate of 94 percent in 1960 and only 83 percent in 2010. White working poor were married at a rate of 84 percent in 1960 but only 48 percent in 2010. There is no denying the correlation between marriage and prosperity, with the number of non-married men and women among the working poor continuing to grow. I used white population numbers to illustrate the contrast, but the percentages for people of color are much worse.

Another indicator of the dramatic change in the family and thus economic condition is the number of children born to unmarried parents. In 1960, only two percent of white babies were born to unwed mothers. In 2010, 29 percent of white babies, 72.5 percent of black babies, and 53.3 percent of Latino babies were born to unwed mothers.

A large body of social science data confirms the best family structure for children is also the best for society as a whole. The same bodies of data show conclusively that the traditional family structure



consisting of a married mother and father has no equal in providing the essential elements for raising children. The traditional family structure produces lower rates of child poverty, lower rates of youth crime, lower rates of violent crime, lower rates of drug abuse by young people, and healthier and more productive citizens.

During my short time in the Minnesota Legislature and giving time to the study of these issues, I have come to realize that the consequences of the policies legislated over the last 50 years, albeit with good intent, have in many ways contributed to the demise of the family structure. We have enabled people to dismiss what, previously, were accepted norms of responsibly. In far too many homes, the state's programs have come to replace the male father figure as the source of income and male role modeling and to dismiss the importance of male leadership, emotional support, and faith modeling needed for a healthy family structure.

In whole segments of our society, men have abdicated their responsibility for raising the children they helped to create. It is not popular or politically correct in many quarters to discuss such matters, but we cannot legislate or spend our way out of these problems. If these trends continue, the economic gap will widen to a point where current levels of assistance to families is unsustainable.

In the 1990s, a Democratic president and Republican congress enacted sweeping welfare reform to the wails of people who said that there would be long lines of desperate people. The long lines didn't materialize, and people acted in their best interest and found employment.

For a fundamental change to happen again, individual families will have to act in their own and their children's best interest. The families attempting to make the change will need reinforcement but not in the form of more government assistance. Real community influences like places of worship must validate the

new choices in values and be intimately involved in training, coaching, and temporary provision.

*Mike Benson, a Republican from Rochester, is a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives.*

## **Why Aren't Our Social Institutions Working?**

*by Barry Casselman*

For many decades, through relentless technological change and rapid alterations in the general prosperity of most Americans, we have endured an unprecedented transformation of many basic social institutions. These include marriage, family size, and education, among others.

It's a very big subject and cannot be adequately treated in a few hundred words, but that does not mean we should ignore the phenomena and their consequences.

With divorce rates, out-of-wedlock birth rates, and the way families now function in day-to-day U.S. society becoming so dramatically different in so short a time, we cannot simply look away and hope for something restorative to happen by magic. On the other hand, the simple restoration to earlier paradigms of marriage, family life, and educational structures is probably not in the social cards we have to play.

There is so much propaganda, rhetoric, and ideological manipulation today that it is difficult to know where to begin. The contemporary commonplace that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer is typical of this problem. Perhaps expressed only in dollars and cents, and employing dubious assumptions, this commonplace can be asserted, but what if we compare the contrasts between rich and poor at the beginning of the last century, or during the period 1930-41, and now?

As I see it, the very nature of economic and social life has changed in this past century in ways which are incomparable. The general population lives longer, has much better health resources, has many more economic resources, and has more personal freedom than at any time in history, here or anywhere else. In 1910, in 1935, or in 1960, if you were poor, you were fundamentally poorer by today's standards.

Much of today's distortions, or inequalities, seem to emanate from the intrusion of centralized government into private lives, family life, and the nature of public education.

At the same time, many of the reforms and innovations of the past 100 years have improved the quality of American life, including the discarding of racial, religious, and gender discrimination, enabling universal voting suffrage, eliminating child labor, protecting the safety of the workplace for adults, and making public education available to every child.

By failing to separate the abuses of government from the benefits of government, by failing to employ the natural efficiency of democratic capitalism while compounding its bureaucratic inefficiencies, the very nature of American life and its basic social component, the family unit, seem increasingly out of control. The notion that some form of government-imposed economic and social parity is a solution is a total misunderstanding of our problems. This, in fact, is the kind of thinking that aggravates and compounds our problems.

I have no simple solution to our national problems, and I am very dubious of any quick changes in marital, family, and education patterns. Others much more knowledgeable than I am no doubt have commonsense and workable ideas for turning our problems into solutions and for creating a better life for most Americans. What I do suggest is that we examine first the most fundamental reasons why our social institutions are no longer working.

Trying to cure symptoms with no accurate diagnosis of the underlying and deepest causes of our national crises is not a solution.

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## A Modern-Day John Wesley for a Start

by **Chuck Chalberg**

Because I'm an historian, not a futurist, I'd prefer not to speculate about what the country might look like, if present trends in family breakdown persist—or, worse yet, worsen. Besides, these trends run against my temptations toward optimism, not to mention my desire to avoid what might be termed “declinism”—and words like “dire” and “foreboding” that accompany it.

If anything, the greater temptation today is to surrender to a sense of hopelessness, given our ever-rising rates of illegitimacy. Nonetheless, hope remains a virtue worth practicing. As the inimitable G. K. Chesterton once put it, “Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless, or it is no virtue at all.”

George Will and others have called for—and hoped for—a modern-day John Wesley to sweep through the ghettos of America. Well, maybe the day is coming when something less than that, spiritually speaking, yet something more than that, geographically speaking, will be upon us. Maybe the next John Wesley will find that he needs to sweep over much of the country. Or maybe the reason that the next Wesley will be widening his net will lead to our doing something about this problem sooner.

Curiously, perhaps even paradoxically, one might draw a measure of hope from the fact that the racial gap between out-of-wedlock births among white and black women is narrowing proportionally. The problem, of course, is that this divide is narrowing because of the rise in white illegitimacy rates, rather



than a decline in black illegitimacy. So where is there any basis for hope in *this*?

Well, maybe, just maybe, the day is coming when we can finally get beyond race when thinking about this matter. If so, maybe we can all agree that we do have a considerable societal problem on our hands—a problem that can be tackled more honestly and more effectively if the matter of race is neutralized or at least greatly minimized.

In other words, this might be one of those stories where things have to get worse before they can get better. Have we reached the bottom point? No one knows, but we can always hope so.

At the risk of being overly hopeful, let's posit that we have begun to find our way back to an increasingly distant past. Let's look at American life in the idyllic '50s. Liberals look back to the '50s and find rampant conformity and even more rampant racism, among other evils. Conservatives condemn the racism, worry little about the alleged conformity, and celebrate pretty much everything else about that lost decade. But let's say these '50s are the 2050s, when our family structure looks more like the 1950s than is the case today. What will have happened? 2012 happened. I don't mean the defeat of a certain incumbent president, though that would certainly be helpful. Politics isn't everything. But culture often is. Culture certainly trumps politics.

But isn't the largest problem economic? No, it isn't. If culture trumps politics, it also buttresses economics. Think of the 1930s, when a much stronger culture helped sustain us through economic troubles much worse than we face today.

An example of wrong-headedness that avoids getting at the real problem is a recent proposal to resort to massive busing to reduce racial disparities in student test scores. What if there is a greater correlation between low test scores and single-parent families? Should we then bus students so as to distribute them more evenly on this basis? After all, wouldn't fatherless students benefit from learning and interacting with students from intact families?

Of course, I'm being facetious here, but I'm doing so to make a point. Busing students on the basis of race doesn't get at the real problem. If anything, it's a convenient way to avoid confronting the real problem. The same might be said of gun control campaigns. Both amount to missing the point.

Here's hoping that 2012 becomes the year when we begin to focus on the problem: family breakdown, or, in many cases, a failure of families to form. This will require all of us, politicians and non-politicians, whites and blacks and others, to summon the courage to face this problem. Liberals like to believe they think in terms of getting at the root cause of problems. Well, family breakdown is the root cause of many, many problems. It's a root cause that liberals prefer to ignore, because confronting this problem means challenging two key constituencies: African-Americans and single women.

This is also a root cause that conservatives have failed to face, because conservatives fear charges of racism. In addition, some conservatives lean toward some version of libertarianism. SLIBECONS (social liberals and economic conservatives), they prefer to downplay the consequences of the sexual revolution, even including family breakdown.

Both liberals and conservatives must turn the same page—and soon. Both must face the fact that our republic will not survive if these trends are not reversed—and soon. Given the enormity of the problem and the narrowing of the racial divide, this might be the perfect time to face this problem together—and to hope that our political leaders will at least not interfere with bottom-up cultural renewal.

All of this is not to say that we couldn't use another John Wesley. But there is plenty to do in the meantime, as long as we begin with the realization that a large problem exists and that race has little, if anything, to do with it. Let's hope that hoping for that much will be a start toward building that brighter future that few of us dare imagine at the moment.

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## Taking Divorce Seriously

by **Larry Colson**

Contrary to the “happily ever after” notion espoused in fairy tales and romance novels, marriage is hard. It almost appears to be a concept set up for failure. Young people, giddy with love and other strong urges, choose partners ostensibly for life, and embark upon a journey filled with demanding hurdles. Despite these obstacles put in place by finances, employment, children, and in-laws, many marriages do succeed. Yet many end in divorce. This is a situation we ought to find alarming.

I don’t believe that we, as a society, are serious about reducing divorce. While most will agree that the high rate of divorce in America is bad for our civilization, our culture, and our children, we increasingly accept divorce as normal. It used to be that there was a social stigma applied to people whose marriage got into trouble and ended in divorce. Divorce happened, but it was frowned upon and could negatively affect one’s career and social circles. It was viewed as a failure in one of life’s most important decisions and the breaking of a solemn vow. “Oh, you’re divorced,” followed by an uncomfortable silence was not an uncommon reaction.

Today, the marriage vow is often treated as just some pretty words people say to each other, and the failure of a marriage is accepted as just another pothole on life’s highway. Even multiple marriages and divorces are common. We’re all at least passingly familiar with the extreme situations with Larry King and Elizabeth Taylor, lifetime achievers in the celebrity serial-marriage tournament, and most of us know someone who has been divorced twice or more. I have a friend whose father is on marriage number five, and when it comes up in conversation, it has become a point of amusement, rather than one of

disgust. The latter emotion ought to be the one we feel.

A Pew Research study in 2009 found that, nationally, five percent of people who have been married have done so three or more times—a simply stunning statistic. I wonder what a man who has been to the altar that many times can say to get a woman to agree to accompany him on yet another of his trips down the aisle. There’s a course for salesmen somewhere in there. Thankfully, at least for the friends and relatives of the serial monogamists, lavish receptions and gifts for the happy but likely doomed couple are still not common.

A growing trend among Generation Xers is to have first marriages lasting only a few years—typically less than five years, and which don’t include the creation of any offspring. There is speculation that marriage for many of this generation is more akin to “checking the box” on something they just ought to do, rather than a serious decision about a lifelong commitment. There’s even a phrase for this phenomenon: starter marriage. The fact that such a phrase has entered our lexicon should tell us everything we need to know about the state of marriage in America today.

I suppose I ought not to be surprised that divorce is treated as normal. Still, as long as we collectively continue to be unfazed by the failure of marriage and see divorce as just another normal course of events for a marriage, this sacred institution will continue its decline toward redefinition as a more permanent co-habitation agreement, and our nation will be worse off for it.

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## Aristotle and Locke Vindicated

by *Laurence D. Cooper*

Continued high rates of family fragmentation would surely bring many unpleasant results—not only economic and social results, but political ones as well. I'd like to focus on one of the latter: The possibility—however remote—of the emergence of a powerful, organized, *illiberal* political movement. Such a thing is unprecedented in American history, but so are today's high rates of family fragmentation, let alone the even-higher rates projected for tomorrow. America may be exceptional, but Americans aren't exempt from the needs and tendencies of human nature.

The success—and in the long run, even the survival—of self-government requires more than a wise constitution and more even than a wise constitution supplemented by prosperity. Self-government also requires a citizenry with certain dispositions and character traits. Some of these traits, or virtues, are private or domestic. These are the qualities necessary for success and satisfaction amid a modern, commercial society: moderation, self-control, the ability to defer gratification, and the like.

Yet these qualities, as important as they are, are not enough to undergird successful self-government. In addition to the domestic virtues that make for peace and material well-being are public virtues, the qualities that make for spirited, intelligent, and responsible citizenship. These are the vigorous virtues—qualities like respect for the rights of others, *protectiveness* toward others, patriotism, and the ability and inclination to engage in civic life.

Thanks to the work of social scientists and commentators like Mitch Pearlstein, we are accustomed to recognize the importance of the family with respect to inculcating the domestic virtues. Where families fragment, we know the basis of economic success and social mobility erodes. What may be less well understood is that the family is important to the inculcation of the public virtues as well.

Political philosophers, ancient and modern, have argued persuasively that the family acts, among other things, as a kind of miniature polity in which children are trained in the qualities appropriate to the regime in which they live. In a family well suited to liberal democracy, parents model and teach loyalty and commitment, prudence and deliberation, affection and spirited defense.

Aristotle taught that rational and humane politics requires the moderation of men's pride and tyrannical tendencies. Locke understood that liberal politics would require the emergence of the liberal family, in which paternal authority would become parental authority and parental authority would be limited authority. The premise: The attachment to and capacity for political self-rule requires prior training in personal self-rule. It seems to me that Aristotle and Locke have been vindicated by the facts. Historically, the successful transition to liberal politics from feudal and other illiberal practices was accompanied and aided by family re-formation.

If it's true that self-governance depends on a certain kind of family life—not in every family, of course, but in society at large—then widespread family fragmentation might well threaten the stability and even the survival of our political order. What precisely that might mean is anyone's guess. It could be that the consequences of disorder and discontent could somehow be contained à la feudal clientelism.

Still, dependence doesn't just diminish, it also offends and degrades, angers and disappoints. It provokes, particularly among the young. Perhaps the provocation would lead to a wholesome reaction—to moral renewal grounded in religious awakening. Yet the danger also exists that dependency, discontent, and disappointment would also or instead provoke something darker—some form of the politics of resentment, possibly animated by an ideology that vindicates resentment.

The point is not that family fragmentation leads directly to illiberal politics, but family fragmentation does tend to lead to a pervasive sense of frustration and grievance and therewith humiliation. These



unhappy sentiments can create fertile ground for illiberal politics. Think of the appeal of authoritarian ideologies to once prosperous peoples during the 1920s and '30s. Or, think of the appeal of militant Islam today, not only in majority-Muslim countries but also in European cities and, according to some reports, even in American prisons. Could such a threat arise in America in a serious way?

I said at the start that America has never known a powerful, organized, illiberal political movement. That was a bit of an overstatement. What I should have said is that no such movement has ever triumphed in America. A deeper and more wholesome political culture has always kept such movements at bay, but until recently, America has been a country of intact families. A future of increased family fragmentation would be a new kind of exceptionalism, a departure this time not so much from other peoples but from our own past.

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## **Fragmented Families and Attribution Errors**

**by Edward P. Ehlinger, M. D., M.S.P.H.**

*“You think that if you understand one, you understand two—because one and one are two. But you must also understand ‘and.’” A Sufi proverb.*

Inspired by dramatic advances in science and technology, our society has increasingly embraced a black-and-white reductionist model in addressing our most pressing health and social problems. This approach suggests that every problem can be explained by a single factor such as a pathogen, a genetic flaw, an injury, or a behavioral choice. In the search for these single causes, efforts are made to get rid of or control for any variable that confounds the analysis.

In stark contrast is an evolving approach that embraces a different view of causation. As succinctly elucidated by the Sufi proverb above, this nuanced, dynamic, and contextual perspective recognizes the interconnected, intertwined, and synergistic nature of the health and social issues that are an integral part of our society and the environment in which we live.

Instead of dismissing or controlling for the confounding factors, this approach embraces these factors as essential in both explaining problems and developing potential solutions.

Systems dynamics research has recently demonstrated what the Sufis have long known—that context is important. When different people are placed in the same complex situation, they tend to behave in similar ways. A reductionist perspective tends to attribute their behaviors to individual rather than situational factors—that is, to character (and usually character flaws), rather than the system in which they reside. This tendency to blame or scapegoat the person rather than the system is called the fundamental attribution error.

Nowhere is the fundamental attribution error more evident than in the analysis of family fragmentation due to divorce, single parenthood, or out-of-wedlock births. The reductionist approach attributes these problems solely to choices made by individuals. The contextual approach broadens the scope of attribution by recognizing that, while individuals make the choices that affect their lives, they do so within a complex social environment that often limits their alternatives and within circumstances that are frequently outside their control. This approach sees causation as a complex interaction of individual responsibility and the social environment.

Complicit with fundamental attribution error is the labeling of “fragmented families” as the core of many of the problems facing our society. Both of these create a ruse that detracts us from the real issues—the systemic factors that lead to family fragmentation—like the alcohol industry, which wants us to focus on underage and college



drinking so we don't recognize that alcohol abuse is a broader societal problem. The same with our political and economic systems that want the focus to remain on individual responsibility so that we don't recognize that the real causes of distress in our society are fostered by the political and economic systems themselves.

The writer Thomas Pynchon stated, "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers." The questions about "what can be done to measurably reduce out-of-wedlock births and divorce" and "how abridged mobility and starker class divisions play out for lower-income and minority men, women, and children, in particular" are not the proper questions. The essential question is, how can we alter the social and economic circumstances that limit the choices of people of color and lower-income individuals to unhealthy alternatives?

Once we acknowledge that it is poverty, hunger, homelessness, joblessness, income inequality, illiteracy, poor schools, violence, decaying neighborhoods, segregation, and various forms of injustice, including bigotry and racism, that limit the choices of individuals, we will be closer to the right questions. We will then be compelled to admit that these situations didn't occur spontaneously or solely by the choices of the individuals affected by these forces. They evolved as a result of the public and private policy decisions made to sustain and advance our economic and social system—a system that has created some of the largest disparities and inequities in the world.

By improperly defining the problem, we lose the opportunity to ask the right questions. By attributing complex social behaviors solely to individual responsibility, we lose sight of how the social environment shapes the choices that people make. In doing this, attention is diverted from the real changes that need to be made to create the opportunities that will enhance the well-being of all—changes that will require all of us, including the privileged, wealthy, educated, and powerful, to look closely at ourselves and our complicity in

creating a social and economic system that gives rise to inequities and myriad social ills.

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## Acknowledge Why Breakdown Occurs

*by Arvonne Fraser*

Abridged mobility and starker class divisions are a concern, but I cannot resist noting that our current president and his two Democratic predecessors are powerful examples of mobility in American society. Interestingly, all three had strong mothers—women more educated than their peers. These women were a more constructive force in the lives of their first-born sons than were the children's fathers. Two of the three presidents were products of what are often called broken families or broken homes, yet they became academic achievers, gaining admission to and graduating from the nation's top universities.

A girl's education has always been key to her social and economic mobility and to that of her children. Middle- and upper-class parents often sent a girl to college to gain a good husband. Poor families with aspirations for their girls made sure they were educated as insurance against a bad or nonexistent husband. Educated women, they believed, could support themselves and/or their children.

Marriage and children were seen as a girl's fate. Pity the girl who got pregnant before marriage or whose husband died or left her. Desertion was the poor man's divorce; "shotgun" marriages were parents' retribution. Domestic violence was the price some women paid—and still pay—for economic security.

Yet as Stephanie Coontz writes in her fascinating 2005 book *Marriage, a History*, the 20th century saw the "democratization of marriage." Women, as a group, became more educated than men; birth control became legal and widely practiced; and the women's

movements of that century opened new education and employment opportunities for women, making them more independent economically and legally. Throughout much of the 20th century, young men could earn enough to be family breadwinners with just a high school education, but as industrial production declined, the two-income family gradually became the economically successful model.

No longer can many women, of any race or ethnicity, rely on marriage for economic security. The old shotgun-marriage tradition is gone, because many men cannot support families alone. Out-of-wedlock births have become more socially accepted. Teen pregnancies have declined. Many older women are deliberately getting pregnant, without the benefit of a spouse. Birth rates among unmarried women aged 30 to 44 have steadily increased since the late 1990s. They have tripled for women in their 20s and more than doubled for women in their 30s. For women, this could be called social mobility.

Sadly, more than half of all poor children in America live in female-headed households, while 40 percent of women who head families live in poverty. This is because women still tend to earn less than men, and child support laws are often neither enforced nor enforceable. Ideas about life are slower to change than the realities. Children are still considered the primary responsibility of mothers because the old marriage contract was that wives were supported economically in exchange for physically caring for home and family and educating children until they were old enough to go to school. In return, during the marriage ceremony, she agreed to obey him. He was legally head of the family and publicly its representative. She took his name to signify she had signed that contract.

Unfortunately, most American men today cannot live up to the terms of the old marriage contract. They cannot earn enough to support even the smaller families of today, especially given increasing life spans. The word “obey” is gone from most wedding ceremonies. Yet to remain viable, society still depends on the current generation of child-bearing adults having enough children (or on luring

enough immigrants of child-bearing age) to join the workforce, to help produce the next generation, and to care for the aged generation.

Unlike most other industrialized societies, U.S. public policy is hardly children-friendly. If it were, school hours would coincide with normal business hours, plus commuting time. But what’s worse, public school funding is being cut, class sizes are growing larger, and families are now expected to provide school supplies that used to be provided by schools. Education beyond high school is becoming necessary for the economic viability of both our society and its workers and yet post-secondary tuition is rising as wages stagnate and equal pay for women has not been achieved.

In today’s society, marriage is a new economic partnership, but too many mothers are expected to take on three jobs: one paid, two unpaid. The paid job is to earn enough to help provide food, clothing, housing, and school costs for their children. The unpaid jobs are to care physically and emotionally for their children and not only to make them school-ready but also to make sure they achieve as well as their more economically advantaged peers in school.

There simply are not enough hours in a day for any human to do all this well, but there is a shortage of good marriageable men. Without even knowing the term, many young women are doing cost-benefit analyses. They are discovering that having another adult in a household who is unwilling or unable to share all the tasks of keeping a family intact is not in any wage earner’s best interest.

Instead of complaining that family breakdowns are stunting children, it might be more useful to acknowledge why family breakdowns occur, to value the work of raising children, and to develop public policies that promote mobility through education and stability through reducing economic inequality.

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# The Advantages of Private Charities

by Paul J. Gessing

As a die-hard libertarian, I must admit that the breakdown of the American family has traditionally not been at the top of my agenda, either personally or professionally. The size and scope of the U.S. government, returning that government to its Constitutional role, and generally seeing to it that governments act to protect rather than restrict individual liberty have been my life's work.

Still, I must admit that running a think tank in New Mexico has opened my eyes to the very real problems that the breakdown of the American family creates within a given state and, ultimately, for our nation as a whole.

First, some background. Among all states, New Mexico has the third-highest ratio of out-of-wedlock births as a percentage of overall births. Given this, it's not surprising that New Mexico's poverty rate is the third-highest in the nation. Also not surprising is that New Mexico receives more in terms of federal transfer payments than any other state according to *The Economist*.

While this is only one case, it is clear that a correlation exists between dependency on government and the breakdown of the American family. The question is, "which came first, the breakdown or the dependency?" In other words, has the breakdown of the American family led Americans to become more dependent on government, or have the welfare programs enabled the breakdown to occur?

Personally, I am not entirely concerned about this situation, because I don't think there is a correct answer. The two clearly go hand-in-hand.

In any case, what can be done? Simply put, we must completely revamp the welfare state. Certainly, welfare reform was successful during the 1990s, but it only started the job of restoring some sense of rationality and federalism to such programs. Medicaid is just one unsustainable program crying

for reform, not expansion (as we see happening under ObamaCare).

Ultimately, the goal of fiscal conservatives and social conservatives should be to return all social welfare programs to state control and state funding. Once that occurs, some states will inevitably decide to shrink or even eliminate certain aspects of current programs. This would open the door for private charities to step into the breach and prove that they can be more effective and innovative in serving the needs of the poor than any government program can.

That is where the restoration of the American family can begin. After all, governments will inevitably tread softly when it comes to making so-called "moral" judgments such as encouraging families to stay together, encouraging couples to adopt children, and encouraging women to hold off on having babies until they are mature enough to do so.

To be blunt, private charities can experiment and innovate in ways that the federal government never could and that even state governments likely won't.

Thus, my solution to a "conservative" problem is rather "libertarian," but it doesn't end there.

While I remain agnostic on the issue of "gay marriage," I cannot help but to believe that gay adoption should be encouraged, at least in the absence of qualified heterosexual couples. Getting kids out of foster care and adopted into more permanent family situations would be good for the future of the American family, and it could clearly help large numbers of children lead happier, more fulfilling lives.

There is no silver bullet when it comes to restoring the American family. The best we can do is to allow private charities and individuals to experiment with new ideas that also reduce government dependency.

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*prosperity for New Mexico based on principles of limited government, economic freedom, and individual responsibility.*

## **As the Family Goes, So Goes Society**

**by Steve Gottwalt**

I am an optimist by nature, but the band R.E.M. put it rather aptly: “It’s the end of the world as we know it!” There is little doubt we face a dark future in Minnesota and this nation if we do not dramatically reverse current trends in family life and reemphasize the importance of healthy families.

Increasingly, liberal sensibilities have eroded essential principles of a healthy family and society. Their definition of freedom is “anything goes”—and it is going, going, gone. The media storytellers in our culture regularly ridicule, parody, and pillory the nuclear family. In their eyes, the traditional family has become a quaint, trite anachronism instead of the foundational cornerstone and bellwether of a healthy society.

The results are alarming. Today, 41 percent of children in America are born out of wedlock. Men regularly father children and then leave. Upwards of half of marriages end in divorce, and fewer young couples are choosing to marry at all. Time that families spend sharing a meal together has evaporated while the time spent in front of flat screens has skyrocketed. The average teenager spends more time texting, gaming, and watching TV than studying in school. Huge numbers of children in this country are clinically obese. And experts say this could be the first generation with a shorter life expectancy than its parents.

As the family goes, so goes society, and there is little doubt these trends in family life are tearing apart the greater fabric of our society. The future for our young people depends on how we address these realities. Our fiscal policies also threaten the future for our children. If we continue making promises we cannot

keep with money we do not have, piling mountains of debt incurred while implementing failed government policies, the results are predictable. We have only to look to Europe in general and Greece in particular to see where our current path will lead.

Our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will pay the vast majority of their earnings in taxes just to cover the crushing government debt burden—if they can find work at all. With the fragmentation and denigration of the traditional family come lower academic achievement and dramatically reduced earning power. The skilled labor force needed for future success is already being hamstrung by policies that tear down the strong family incubators needed to develop resilient, talented, motivated, and well-educated adults.

We are setting up our progeny for the perfect storm of crushing debt, diminished capacity, and shrinking economic opportunity. The result (unless we change course) will be overwhelming failure, despair, and unrest. The promise of a free and prosperous America, founded on the virtues of hard work, personal responsibility and achievement, and featuring unlimited opportunity will be lost. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the birthright of all Americans, will become hollow concepts as our successors struggle just to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. We’ve seen this before—in socialist and communist countries where policies intending to make everyone “equal” tend to make them equally poor, not equally wealthy.

This is a dark and disturbing future, and one we need to avoid for our sake and for the sake of all who come after. If America is to remain a shining beacon of prosperity and exceptionalism to the rest of the world, we have some serious choices to make about how we empower, support, and rely upon healthy families and family values.

There is a more healthy, substantive, and sustainable path, if we have the wisdom to choose it. More than 20 years ago, Minneapolis-based Search Institute, based on broad research, defined 40 “developmental assets” every child needs to succeed. Most of



them revolve around strong, traditional family values including personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, integrity, self-discipline, and parental engagement. The more of these assets children have, the better.

Promoted under the banner “Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth,” the developmental assets made much sense but never really caught on broadly. Why not? Because to embrace Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth, one must accept that the only sustainable solutions to what ails much of society involve a direct return to basic, traditional, and intrinsic family values—not more government.

Healthy families with a married mother and father are more likely than fragmented homes to stay out of poverty and need less government assistance. They achieve higher incomes and experience greater stability. Children of families that share meals regularly are far more likely to succeed in school and far less likely to land in jail. Young people who spend more time on studies and interacting with family members than on gaming devices and TV are far more likely to succeed in school and far less likely to be depressed.

We must eschew the political correctness of the Left and embrace commonsense values, empowering healthy marriages and families to do what they do best: provide for their needs and the needs of their children in a manner that builds resilient and sustained success over a lifetime. As the family goes, so goes society. The choice is up to us.

*Steve Gottwalt, a Republican from St. Cloud, is a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives.*

## Moynihan’s Central Truths

by *Pete Hegseth*

The problem outlined by Mitch Pearlstein is soundly argued—family breakdown has been hastened by higher rates of non-marital birth, divorce, and

cohabitation, leading to less educational and economic opportunity for affected children and adults. This decrease in upward mobility, combined with greater domestic and global economic competition, will lead to abridged social mobility for lower- and middle-income citizens.

In shorthand: broken families (minus) education (minus) economic opportunity (plus) an increasingly competitive job market (equals) the poor staying poor and the middle class getting poorer—a bad equation all around.

What might be done to avoid such splintering among Americans and Minnesotans, especially the portion of the splintering caused or exacerbated by family breakdown? I’d like to reinforce a particular emphasis in answering the question.

The answer to how we avoid splintering has less to do with policy and much more to do with culture. I’m reminded of the prescient Daniel Patrick Moynihan quotation: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, which determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”

The reason the pro-life debate has shifted towards conservatives is that we’ve effectively cornered the cultural battle, convincing Americans that life starts before birth and deserves equal protection. Similarly, the gay marriage debate has shifted towards liberals because they’ve captured the cultural high ground, portraying homosexual relationships as normal while portraying traditionalists as narrow-minded. Policy had an impact in both cases, but culture—images of tiny fetuses on one hand and loving same-sex relationships on another—has overtaken policy.

The same applies to addressing the problem of family breakdown. No amount of social policy—whether abstinence-only sex education, curbing no-fault divorce laws, or marital tax benefits—can replace a father being a father, a mother being a mother, and both striving to have a healthy marriage. A mother and father are the people who make the change needed to avoid the splintering of families. Policies

can serve as a powerful reinforcement to values that already exist but won't prevent the family breakdown our eroding values have wrought.

I've been divorced and conceived a child out-of-wedlock with my second and "ultimate" wife (to steal Pearlstein's verbiage). We married, had that child, and have now had a second child. No policies or tax incentives changed my by-definition high-risk behavior. It was my family and the culture of values and priorities they instilled that enabled me to move past circumstances that plague so many adults and children. Had I been raised in a family where faith, fidelity, and fatherhood were not valued, my choices could have led to family breakdown. A law would not have prevented that.

The other aspect of culture that can mitigate (but not prevent) the consequences of family breakdown is high-quality education, enabled by true education reform. If the culture of home, church, or community is broken, and parents won't or can't instill industrious values, then high-quality, safe, and affordable education is the stopgap. Education reforms—including education choice, school competition, student mobility, teacher accountability, and high expectations—can repair the safety net that currently fails so many low-income and high-risk youth in Minnesota and across America.

As for my overall culture argument, I don't have the space here to suggest meaty policy answers, but I know that our religious, civic, and community organizations play a vital role. Public policy solutions should be centered on empowering, enabling, and unencumbering the missions of these critical organizations that strengthen the family unit and the lives of children.

*Pete Hegseth recently ran for the United States Senate from Minnesota and is an American Experiment senior fellow.*

## Free Higher Education for All

by *Phyllis Kahn*

In trying to attack this very glum prognosis, I will offer a few alternative scenarios. I am omitting one of the most important issues, the total health care picture, and I hope someone else will do that.

First, just as we welcomed interracial families many years ago, we must give the same support to alternative family arrangements and defeat the nasty anti-family amendment on the ballot in this election. We must encourage loving families of all sorts, and we must allow same-sex couples to have access to health care and retirement packages that heterosexual couples have.

One non-statistical personal observation on this topic: My son and daughter-in-law (a boring standard married family with four kids) live in Montreal. Because items like health care are not tied to marriage in Canada, there are possibly more cohabitating couples there than here. Quebec was the first province to allow same-sex marriage. As their gay friends took advantage of their new freedom to marry, my son and daughter-in-law observed an increase in this decision for their heterosexual friends. Why? The bar for demonstrated commitment had suddenly been set higher. So much for gay marriage destroying traditional marriage.

Next, once families are formed, one of their most important decisions is to have the right number of children at the right time—thus the importance of full family-planning services. This is also important for the economic health of the family and the state.

The following information is from the Guttmacher Institute describing the savings attributed to family planning (totally omitting emotional benefits):

- The services provided at publicly funded clinics saved the state and federal governments an estimated \$5.1 billion in 2008. Services provided at Title X-supported clinics account for nearly \$3.4 billion of that total.



- In other words, every one dollar spent nationally on helping women avoid unwanted pregnancies saved \$3.74 in Medicaid expenditures.
- Another relevant number: One-quarter of U.S. women and half of poor women obtaining contraceptive services do so at publicly funded family planning centers.

In addition, let us accept the premise that a big part of family stress comes from economic problems. In Minnesota, we continually believe that our economic future needs a large component of intellectual activity-based industry. Although there are many levels of education useful for participation, one of the most important is college. The increasing cost of higher education, and problems in paying resulting debt, are additional causes of stress for families and individuals.

Think about the possibility of having totally free higher education for all. This would require an infusion of about \$1.515 billion of state funds to institutions of higher learning, or about nine percent of the total state annual general fund budget of \$17.3 billion.

A less-complete step regarding this problem would be to stop all tuition increases at the University of Minnesota and in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system. This would cost a more modest \$242 million, which is 1.4 percent of the state annual general fund budget.

An even more modest approach, contained in a bill I offered, was to let students pay college debt by a tax credit on income earned by working in Minnesota after graduation. This would have the benefit of keeping our educated students in the state. Because of their education, many would probably be at a higher income level.

These are only three parts to the very complicated set of issues posed. Stopping the assault on different families, stopping attacks on public birth control

efforts, and supporting higher education more fully would all work to benefit the state and its families, benefit the nation, and benefit the economy.

*Phyllis Kahn, a DFLer from Minneapolis, is a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives.*

## Most Importantly, Tell the Truth

*by John R. LaPlante*

If family fragmentation has very real emotional, educational, and financial costs, what can civic-minded people do about it? The answer, in short, is for government to stop offering bad incentives and for everyone to start speaking the truth. We need a change in both public policy and culture.

On the public policy side, there are several measures to take:

- The welfare reform of the 1990s was a modest first step. Its work requirements should be made stronger, not weaker.
- Somehow—the particulars are beyond the scope of this essay—we must ensure that families, not taxpayers, take care of the elderly.
- Men with poor education and work histories have dismal job prospects. Some laws on the books make them even less attractive as workers and, by extension, as husbands. We should scrap minimum wage, occupational licensing, and project-labor agreement laws that raise the cost of hiring people.
- The War on Drugs makes the drug trade much more attractive, especially to low-skilled individuals, than employment. End the war, and far fewer men will be scarred by encounters with the criminal justice system—and, again, more suitable for marriage.



- We should make it easier for educational entrepreneurs to develop new schools. The success of Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools shows that some parents want and will flock to schools that emphasize discipline and virtue.

Yet as important as it is to change laws, it's even more important to change cultural beliefs.

Americans have long celebrated an individualistic ethos, but that ethos has been bound by respect for social boundaries. Starting roughly in the 1960s, those boundaries changed. Religious attitudes help shape those boundaries. How is it that the most religious nation among the developed world is also the one with the highest degree of family fragmentation?

The proposition that moral truth is relative—that truth depends on the context—has become widely accepted both inside and outside religious circles. Yet biblical teaching and tradition offer a non-relative truth: Children should live in an intact family marked by commitments, respect, and love. The social sciences have been confirming, as Mitch Pearlstein laid out in his book, that children are more likely to thrive in such an environment.

Yes, in certain situations, divorce may appear to be better than a troubled marriage—though what marriage has not seen troubles? It is also true, however, that hard cases make for bad moral expectations.

People who believe that family fragmentation is harmful must be willing to tell the truth, even to family and friends. Doing so will require humility, tears, and a willingness to be seen as judgmental. In other words, we need a cultural change, so that getting married before having children, and then staying married, is not just one of many ways of building a family; it is by far the best way, both practically and morally.

Telling the truth is a value in its own right and thus is its own reward. Yet as Pearlstein has documented, family fragmentation has plenty of costs, including

lower national and personal incomes, as well as higher taxes and lost opportunities. In other words, if you love your country, and yourself, you need to affirm the truth.

Am I hoping for a lot? Yes. But cultural beliefs can and do change: Witness, for example, beliefs toward the acceptability of driving under the influence of alcohol. If attitudes toward marriage have changed toward fragmentation, they can change back towards cohesion. In the present crisis, we can hope—and work—for nothing less.

*John R. LaPlante is a senior policy fellow with the Minnesota Free Market Institute at Center of the American Experiment.*

## Work, Thrift, and Marital Commitment

*by David Lapp and W. Bradford Wilcox*

There is nothing inevitable about the splintering of America into an upper class defined by stable marriages and a lower class defined by marriage breakdown. But in order to stop that splintering, we will need to improve—and in some cases, revive—institutions that serve the 70 percent of non-college-educated Americans, particularly those that direct them toward steady work, thrift, and marital commitment.

*Steady Work.* Conservatives typically ignore or downplay how steady work can contribute to forming a strong marriage culture. Yet the association between working-class men's falling economic fortunes and the increased incidence of family fragmentation among the working class is hard to dismiss as coincidental.

Furthermore, once conservatives come around to acknowledging that a lack of steady work leaves men more vulnerable to marital difficulties, there awaits a broad political consensus about using cultural and



political means to buttress the financial realities of marriage and family life in the United States.

Allan Carlson demonstrates how 19th- and early-20th-century American reformers achieved some consensus about the importance of a “family wage.” These reformers tended to cluster within the Democratic Party. As Carlson says, “From the late-nineteenth century until 1964 (with the prominent exception of the Theodore Roosevelt years), the Democratic Party was, broadly speaking, the ‘party of the family.’ It tended to favor the small business, the family farm, and the protection of motherhood, children and workers’ homes from ‘the depredations of capital.’”

Carlson notes that a coalition that included labor unions, Catholics, and “maternalists” argued that a family wage was crucial to ensuring the availability of good work for married fathers and that women should be able to stay home with children. Even some corporate leaders imbibed the idea of a family wage. In 1914, for instance, Henry Ford doubled the minimum rate paid to most autoworkers to \$5 a day for eight hours of work, justifying it by noting that, “The man does the work in the shop, but his wife does the work in the home. The shop must pay them both.”

Research shows that only one-third of wives prefer to work full time. The rest prefer either to work part time (58 percent) or not at all (nine percent). Given these preferences and conservatives’ longstanding concern to give mothers opportunities to care for their own children, conservatives would do well to learn the lessons of an earlier generation of progressive reformers and seek to achieve the family wage as a normative business practice.

We also must find better ways to steer working-class young adults into productive work in the first place. This is where policymakers can help.

The economist Robert Lerman notes that other countries, such as Germany, effectively use apprenticeships and that these countries “have relatively low youth unemployment rates because

apprenticeships result in much smoother transitions from school to careers than does most school-based preparation.” Especially given the current mismatch between available workers for middle-skill jobs and openings for these jobs, policymakers would do well to increase funding for apprenticeships. The increased use of apprenticeships would not only help working-class young adults navigate more smoothly the transition from school to work, it would also help them to build a secure economic foundation on which to start a family.

*Thrift.* As Jeffrey Dew’s research shows, thrifty couples are more likely to enjoy a happy marriage and to stay married. Specifically, he finds that newlywed couples with substantial consumer debt are less happy in their marriages over time. By contrast, newlywed couples who paid off consumer debt early in their marriages were more likely to report happy marriages years down the road. Other research shows that only infidelity and alcohol/drug abuse are more powerful predictors of divorce than the perception that one’s spouse has spent money foolishly.

The problem is that, as a group of scholars and leaders led by the Institute for American Values found in the 2008 report *For a New Thrift*, America “is experiencing a growing polarization in access to institutional opportunities to save and build wealth.” While wealthier households enjoy ready access to wealth-building gurus like investment bankers and stockbrokers, working-class couples are now more likely to access anti-thrift institutions like payday lenders and state lotteries that encourage accruing debt.

To increase working-class couples’ chances for a good marriage, we must address this institutional polarization and make savings and wealth-building institutions—like credit unions—more prominent in working class communities.

*Marital Commitment.* Among Americans with a high school education, 43 percent say that marriage has not worked out for most people they know. Interviews with working-class persons, as well as interviews with cohabiting couples, suggest that the perceived

prevalence of divorce and constant references in the media that “half of all marriages end in divorce” creates a social contagion that weakens individuals’ confidence in marriage as a durable institution.

To fight the bad contagion, institutions must create a good contagion. Philanthropists could request competitive bids for films that depict the power of marital commitment. Public and private institutions could create social marketing campaigns that highlight successful married couples. Community leaders could organize concerned young people together to form young adult-led marriage-strengthening initiatives. Churches could train what University of Minnesota marriage therapist Bill Doherty calls marriage “first aid responders” in how to respond helpfully to friends and family members who are struggling in their marriages. States could pass the “Second Chances Act,” which would create a year-long waiting period for divorce combined with education about the option of reconciliation.

Even as marriage rates decline among working-class Americans, we would do well to remember that the vast majority of them still prize marriage. To support their aspirations, America’s leaders must recognize that because the human person lives within a society and not as an isolated individual, those aspirations will remain just aspirations, unless we improve and revive the social institutions that direct people toward the practices and virtues that help to sustain marriage—namely steady work, thrift, and marital commitment.

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## Not Liberals, Not Tea Partiers, nor the Religious Right

by *George Liebmann*

The title of this symposium invites a jeremiad lamenting the disappearance of the morality and family structure of the 1950s. Yet the past cannot be restored; there have been fundamental changes.

We have a service economy, not a manufacturing or agricultural economy, enhancing demand for the labor of women and college graduates and devaluing the labor of unskilled men. Children are no longer an economic asset, at least in micro-economic terms: Society is more crowded. There are new technologies for birth control. These factors lead to postponed marriage, to what was once regarded as promiscuity, and to lessened prejudice against those who “neither beget nor bear.”

The late Max Rheinstein, perhaps the most learned student of family law, concluded that fidelity could not be coerced by criminal or divorce laws. Hope can be found only in premarital counseling (urged in the 1920s by the pioneer social worker Mary Ellen Richmond) and in measures to relieve economic pressures on families with children (child tax credits, like those in Canada and Norway and now proposed in Germany, and family allowances).

Our current higher education and student loan policies, with no limits on tuitions like those in Britain and Australia, make young workers into indentured servants. Well-intentioned day care policies tax young women into the full-time workforce, even though Mary Richmond’s study of 985 *Widows* and the British Government’s 1968 Plowden Report, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, found that part-time employment of mothers had more to recommend it.

If unwanted pregnancies are to be discouraged, the experience of countries like Mexico suggests that making the advice of nurse practitioners available to young women is more effective than birth control campaigns that outrage religious sentiments. In The



Netherlands, social services are largely delivered through church organizations, producing some of the lowest illegitimacy and abortion rates in Europe, notwithstanding sexual license. Even the French solution stigmatizing divorce but not irregular relationships is preferable to complete *laissez-faire*.

A regime in which young women are encouraged to marry the state has the added vice, discernible in our inner cities, of leaving men without a social function. All this is exacerbated by policies relying on various doles (e.g., extended unemployment insurance, food stamps, and disability payments), rather than on work relief, and by policies accepting youth unemployment rates double those of adults.

Here is what is needed: Premarital counseling, child tax credits, other tax policies that do not penalize part-time employment, work programs and payroll tax preferences for the young, distance learning, ceilings on student loans, a preference for domestic rather than foreign adoptions, and the removal of all aspects of family policy from the naïve and easily influenced Federal courts. This, of course, is not the agenda of liberals, the Tea Party, or the so-called Religious Right.

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## Cooperation, Not False Competition

by Matt Lindstrom

While the economic technicians and technocrats told us the 18-month Great Recession was over three years ago in June 2009, daily economic stability continues to be a concern for many. Official proclamations aside, socioeconomic upward mobility still isn't realistic for most Americans as the recovery lags onward.

The bright news is that overall inflation continues

to be largely in check. However, escalating health care, housing, and higher education costs are squeezing middle- and lower-class family budgets. For many people, the recession is played out daily as receding bank statements, payroll stubs, and government benefits lose out to mounting bills and personal debt.

The Hollywoodized rags-to-riches story of the American Dream, first popularized in 1931 by James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America*, is like a rabbit leading greyhounds around a dog track. It's there but unreachable for most people—especially those without a college education and increasingly even those with a college degree. The future economic, social, and political health of the country depends on public and private investments and political cooperation to create opportunity and choices for all Americans. Recent political and financial debacles dampen my optimism.

The bursting of an \$8 trillion housing bubble, preceded by market malfeasance and cowboy capitalism, led to a cascading economic contraction. The prospect of long-term higher unemployment and a stagnated economic recovery remains likely, as both employers and consumers lack confidence in economic and political elites and their congealed institutions. Faith in nebulously defined free-market financial institutions and the dueling counterpart of a Rooseveltian fix-the-nation federalism is troublingly meek.

Leading up to the global financial crisis, the prevailing wisdom from both political parties was largely to let the financial wizards do their thing. For those riding the stock and housing bubbles, it worked well—before it didn't.

After his 18-year tenure as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan explained to a congressional committee the assumption behind his view of unfettered financial markets: "I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interests of organizations, specifically banks and others, were such as that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in the firms."

Indeed, the leave-us-alone conception of economic freedom was put to a test.

President Kennedy's aphorism "a rising tide lifts all boats" was originally used to justify public infrastructure spending on federal dams. It was a metaphor intended to increase support for a nationwide cooperative, public identity. Subsequently, supporters of supply-side economics cited Kennedy's metaphor as grounds for reducing the top tax rates and for the resulting trickle-down economic impacts.

The most recent economic data reveal limited trickling. Under President Obama, the top one percent of earners (\$352,000) took in 93 percent of the additional income created since the end of the recession. Only 45 percent of income increases went to the top one percent during the Clinton-era economic recovery. In the George W. Bush-era recovery, the figure was only 65 percent.

A longer-term view reveals widespread economic gains achieved in the last century.

According to a 2012 University of Michigan study, 84 percent of Americans have higher inflation adjusted incomes than their parents, and 50 percent have accumulated more wealth than their parents at the same age. Yet increased income and wealth in absolute numbers does not translate into upward mobility, as defined by moving up income classes. As one climbs the economic ladder, the bar is continually raised by a relatively larger growth in the top income and wealth categories. Hence, relative economic mobility is limited. According to the Michigan study, improved incentives to save and educational opportunity were key factors supporting upward economic mobility. These require public and private cooperation—not false competition.

Bringing together the best virtues from free market principles with public policy tools and resources can create effective incentives and infrastructure for a positive future. Faith in our political and financial institutions is fickle. Restoring societal confidence is

especially difficult as America's economic destiny is more globally interconnected and thus increasingly beyond the control of U.S. fiscal and monetary policymakers. However, America has always been about tomorrow, and our culturally optimistic and creative population will lead the way.

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## Free Societies as Schools of the Soul

*by Wilfred M. McClay*

My own view of these matters is both pessimistic and optimistic—pessimistic in the short run, but guardedly optimistic in the longer run.

First to the pessimism. The future of the family is a matter of enormous and incalculable importance, and the strength, health, and integrity of marriage and family life constitute an absolutely essential precondition for all other social, economic, and political goods. The family in America has proven a remarkably durable institution, absorbing the various blows inflicted upon it by the cultural and economic revolutions of the past 50 years without ever succumbing entirely. Yet a price has been paid every step of the way, and there has been steady erosion. The authority and cohesiveness of the family has been deeply weakened by both changes in behavior and changes in values—changes that reinforce one another at every turn and show few convincing signs of reversing.

The family is being upended, but nothing can take its place. No educational system, however lavishly funded, no array of social service agencies, however compassionate and comprehensive, no system of law enforcement, however conscientious and disciplined, no reform of the mass media, however intelligent and morally sensitive, and no legislation emanating from



Washington or St. Paul can successfully replace the family as the morally binding foundation for life in a free society. Hence, none of them can undo the damage we have seen or save us from the hard rains that are coming.

Therefore, yes, we will likely see very poor prospects in the near term for lower-income and minority men, women, and children, but also creeping into the great middle swath of Americans, especially to the degree that the latter group ceases to embrace the patterns of childbearing and family formation that used to be the defining marks of social respectability (a term that is now rarely used without scare-tactic quotation marks—itsself a mark of where we have come). There is no mystery about the relationship between intact, two-parent families and academic attainment; and there is no mystery about the relationship between academic attainment and employment prospects and, therefore, upward mobility.

There is really no way to escape the consequences of these things, which have been long in coming, or to do much more than blunt their impact through social programs that themselves will prove unsustainable. If our politics seem ugly now, just wait until strapped state and local governments begin to renegotiate many of their most basic commitments, as they almost certainly will have to do.

As for the more comfortable and educated upper-middle class, the situation has been well described by Charles Murray in his new book *Coming Apart*. Paradoxically, he argues, this is a class that walks a better game than it talks, showing far fewer of the dysfunctions that cripple the more vulnerable classes in our society but lack the conviction to affirm explicitly and publicly the mores or habituations that actually guide their lives. This class is unwilling to behave like a real elite, unwilling to declare as normative the very values that sustain the orderliness of their lives—values that are all the more essential to those who seek to rise in the world and who have to face a more unforgiving set of conditions. Our popular culture—one of the avenues through which our current elite might behave like a real elite—is, instead, completely awash in content (and

role models) that send all the wrong signals about marriage and family to suggestible young people. The institutions that might counter such messages, such as traditional forms of organized religion, have been rendered too weak and indecisive to matter very much.

So what is to be done? Clearly, there are concrete steps that can be taken in the arena of public policy to make divorce, illegitimacy, and family fracturing less prevalent. The welfare reforms of the 1990s were among the most admirable and effective such steps to be taken in recent memory; similar measures can be devised to make divorce and family fragmentation more difficult. Still, even the most carefully orchestrated bundle of incentives and disincentives cannot take the place of a deep consensus about the dignity and fundamental rightness of the family and of the sacred obligations that our membership in families places upon each and every one of us.

So whence comes my optimism? It comes simply from the fact that we have made serious mistakes, and we are going to pay the price for them. That is an admittedly dismal prospect, but in paying that price, we will be compelled to recover a sense of the thing that we had wantonly sacrificed, and that is perhaps the very thing most needful. When I say that nothing can take the place of the family, I mean the statement to be taken at its full value. There are those who fear that the “soft despotism” of the welfare state will serve to alter human nature itself, enervating us into passivity and depriving us of both the incentives and the sanctions that formerly attended life in the real world. Such observers worry that there is no return from such decline. I do not believe that.

The welfare state will not be able to maintain its hold for long, because it will not be able to sustain itself. A free society in which one is held accountable for one’s deeds will prove to be, over time, a school of the soul—a context within which lost virtues can be regenerated. People will recover the meaning of the family by trying, and failing, to live without it. To the extent that we succeed in restoring our freedom and accountability, to that very extent will the family

spring back into life, having been rediscovered as the natural and best vehicle through which we nurture our young and fulfill the highest requirements of our moral natures, as beings made joyful and fulfilled by the work of self-giving.

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## The Imperative of Shedding Debt

by *Bryce McNitt*

Young Americans today are challenged with an incredibly competitive global economy requiring skills derived from a rigorous, high quality education. The workplace will continue to become more competitive on a global scale, and the cost of education probably will continue to outstrip inflation for decades to come.

To compound this difficulty, the financial crisis of 2008 marked a sea change for all Americans, but especially middle-income Americans. The crisis marked the end of a 60-year expansion of wealth in the United States.

Briefly, wages grew from World War II's end through the early 1970s, at which point average wages stagnated. Wealth continued to expand when households added a second income. Over the ensuing decades this expansion, too, reached its limits, and beginning in the 1980s, accelerating in the '90s, and exploding in the 2000s, cheap debt and subsequent asset bubbles became the chief means of expanding wealth for many middle-class Americans. In 2008, this trend came to a dramatic reversal. Wages today are lower for the middle class than they were in the early 2000s, and Americans are over-leveraged.

Worse still, a tremendous amount of money will necessarily be pulled out of the U.S. economy in the next five to ten years. As our publicly held debt-to-GDP ratio climbs toward 100 percent, markets will

demand that we bring our annual budget deficits to a more acceptable three percent of GDP from the 8.5 percent we saw in 2011.

Why paint this backdrop before discussing how the deterioration of family might affect future generations of Americans? Because the success of young people in the U.S. economy is now increasingly contingent on education and mobility. Mobility, for the purposes of this article, can be defined as the financial ability to pursue economic opportunities that present themselves. More simply defined, the amount of debt, or cash on hand, that may govern one's ability to take on risk in pursuit of economic opportunities. Against the circumstances described above, one couldn't rationally expect much help from a public that must either discontinue current services or dramatically raise taxes to maintain them. Where to turn? Where did previous generations turn? To their families, both nuclear and extended.

For young people in a United States that no longer offers stable, low-skill, high-wage jobs, the support of a family unit will be crucial: support to pay for increasingly expensive educations as well as nurturing support for those pushing forth into uncertain, complex, and challenging workplaces.

The first form of support is clear. Will a young person be able to afford a quality college degree? If so, will his or her debt load stymie their ability to attain continuing education or absorb the cost of a career change in ensuing years, often a necessity in a rapidly changing economy?

The second type of support, although intangible, is incredibly important. Future generations will have to work harder for the same incomes their parents secured, endure more years of difficult education, and spend more time working at low- or no-wage internships. Instability on the home front adds another hurdle for a young person in an already-uncertain time.

The question then becomes, how do we promote stronger families, headed by parents who are willing,



in tough times, to forego their material and emotional well-being for that of their children? I can add one suggestion to the many public policy ideas that have already been offered. We are now a debtor nation, both publicly and privately. The faster we can shed our debt, the faster we will have the mobility necessary to operate in the global economy. Debt impinges on the ability of parents to provide for their children's future, and it delays family formation in young adults as they begin careers with mortgage-sized student loans.

The thoughts I add are culturally focused.

- Roll back our rampant culture of individualism. Our intense fixation upon individual fulfillment above all else, to the detriment of those in our path, has gotten out of hand. A society that places the well-being of individuals above the well-being of families or communities does not produce individuals who would want to persevere when the going gets tough at home, even if it handicaps the children they brought into the world. This is not a problem the government can address, because it's purely cultural. Moreover, the cult of the individual should not be confused with the American enterprising spirit; they're not synonymous.
- Stop debating same-sex marriage and focus on strengthening marriage itself. I'm fully aware that I'm kicking a hornets' nest here, but I come from a strongly socially conservative culture, and I firmly believe that what once may have been legitimate uncertainty about a new cultural evolution has become an exercise in self-deception. I still think of myself as a social conservative, and one who focuses not on the nuts and bolts of tradition but instead on the values on which that tradition is based. A society focused on fidelity and self-sacrifice will reap a greater good than one that has directed so much of its energy simply to preserving the tradition of marriage in purely physical terms.

The challenge we face is to create a more competitive, global future at a time when the strength of our state is diminished. The American Dream will not be as easily attained by future generations as it once was. In this time, we can ill afford to continue to neglect the most fundamental bond we have: family.

*Bryce McNitt is a professional in the transportation sector in Washington D.C. A former American Experiment intern, he has written on politics, foreign affairs, and culture at FrumForum.com and The Daily Beast.*

## Jumping Rope and Imprinting Marriage

*by Rhonda Kruse Nordin*

Franklin School was a three-story stone structure, constructed in the 19th century. Its ceiling height surpassed 20 feet. The surface of its wood floors, scratched and uneven, creaked beneath the weight of the slightest elementary school student. Few of us were single-handedly strong enough to open its heavy doors. The schoolyard was surrounded by a sturdy wire fence more appropriate for a prison. Within this schoolyard, lengthy recesses on cold days stretched to eternity and on warm days left us breathless from tag and jump rope: "Here sits Rhonda, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Rhonda with a baby carriage. How many children will she have?"

The jump rope twirled around me, I leapt to the rhythm, with the rope snapping against the pavement, its velocity accelerating, limiting the number of times I would jump before missing and consequently limiting, too, the number of imaginary children I would have. It was a silly childhood game; even so, it conjured up thoughts of love and marriage. Yet only then, *after* love and marriage, came the baby carriage. That was the order: kissing, loving, marriage, *then* babies. We knew no other order. That was our model, our marriage imprint.



Each of us has a marriage imprint built upon the marriage of our parents. We, as parents, are our children's imprint for intimacy. Based on what children see in the marriage relationship, they draw conclusions and form permanent beliefs and expectations about marriage. Dr. Judith Siegel documents that by the time they leave home at age 18, children recognize marriage as "good" or "bad" and have determined if it is something that they want for themselves and, if they marry, which most of them will, know whether they will have a good marriage.

This marriage imprint, formed from a very early age, wires a child with experiences from the parents' relationship. The marriage imprint shapes a child's personality, choices, relationships and lifetime experiences, and does more to influence a child's long-term well-being than any one single factor.

Unfortunately, we parents could do a better job masterminding the imprint from which our children base their own love stories. The National Longitudinal Study of Youth, involving students age 15 to 18, observes:

- Only 38 percent of teenagers believe their parents are happily married;
- Half of students live with only one biological parent;
- 35 percent of teenagers live with a variation of one biological parent, step-parent, or live-in partner;
- Many see the parent with whom they live remarry and re-divorce;
- Ten percent experience three or four relationship disruptions before leaving home.

Seventy-one percent of teenagers say, "Mom and dad could do better at marriage." Yet young people hold marriage in high esteem: 90 percent desire to marry, and marriage continues to be "the relationship of choice"—the wedding band is a "symbol of first-class citizenship" and a "marker of success."

Although marriage remains a desired social institution, fewer couples are marrying. Many

postpone marriage or avoid it altogether, seeking assurance that marriage will last. Cohabitation rates have soared 1,400 percent since I was jumping rope outside Franklin School, and single-motherhood now accounts for 41 percent of our nation's annual births—eight times the rate of 1960.

The point is this: The relationship of parents counts. Decisions that mothers and fathers—married or unmarried—make in the home on behalf of their family determine the course for their individual families and collectively have a broad ripple effect that influences public and social issues. Until we parents provide an imprint for intimacy from which children draw inspiration for relationship success, I fear couples will avoid marriage, will cohabit, will have children out of wedlock, and will thereby fuel the rise in single-parent homes and their inherent costs to society.

In a perfect world, children would be born to two mature, loving, committed adults involved with that child on a sustained basis for a minimum of two decades.

Perhaps we need to model parenthood to extend beyond caring for a baby: Parenthood also means that men and women care for their relationship and plan for the role each plays, not just as a father or mother, but for the very important role each plays as the spouse or partner of a parent. It is a role few consider, yet playing this role well largely determines the course a family will take and determines the well-being of family members for a lifetime.

Somehow, the generation before me (my parents) and the generation before them (my grandparents)—sporting a low divorce rate and now almost unheard-of rates of cohabitation and single motherhood—modeled marriage as a unique partnership with inherent privileges, responsibilities, meaning, and purpose. Marriage was valued as a channel for self-development, self-respect, pride, and integrity. I wanted to sit in a tree, kiss, fall in love, marry, and have babies—in *that order*. I think my classmates did, too.



The question is, did we pass along the song? Did our kids get the order right? Sitting in a tree, kissing, falling in love, marrying, and then having babies? What will they tell the next generation? Will kids even jump rope anymore? If not, how will they learn the right order?

*Rhonda Kruse Nordin is a resource for parents, professionals and policy-makers for programs and strategies that strengthen families.*

## Practical Prescriptions for Family Stability

by *Bruce Peterson*

I need no convincing about the risks posed by a 40-percent unmarried parenting rate and a 50-percent divorce rate. Troubled people wind up in court, and I have almost come to expect a background of family fragmentation when I see someone struggling and unstable.

Still, fragmentation rates can be reduced. In *Promises I Can Keep*, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalis basically tell how to reduce unmarried parenting after living for two-and-a-half years among low-income mothers in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. Denied meaningful opportunities for higher education, engaging work, travel, and even attractive partners, poor women nevertheless bear children—the most meaningful, engaging, joyous experience available to human beings. Who can blame them?

The obvious implication is that, if young women of limited financial means can find meaning in other ways, they will delay having children—maybe even until they are married! This comports with my own anecdotal experience with the young people I see in court.

I have come to believe that Minneapolis Community and Technical College is the most important institution for family stability in the Twin Cities.

Let's embrace readily accessible community-based college and technical school education as a family-stability measure.

Reducing the divorce rate is trickier but possible. I invited Dr. Bill Doherty of the University of Minnesota to conduct survey research in our court, and he soon determined that, even in the throes of the divorce process, a significant percentage of people are interested in exploring reconciliation. This has led to the establishment of the Couples on the Brink Project, where Bill is conducting groundbreaking work in what he calls "discernment counseling"—that is, helping people make wise decisions about divorcing.

Discernment counseling is one aspect of the more sophisticated view of divorce that we need. Right now, divorce is the default position for marriages in trouble, and divorce lawyers are the principal source of guidance. This is not a formula for family stability.

For this reason, I advocate taking divorce out of the court system, making it available through a simple administrative procedure. Let's give our creative private enterprise system a chance to develop more healing alternatives to family strife than divorce courts offer. I picture family resource centers offering a spectrum of services, from counseling and mediation, to providing guidance in separations while specific problems such as addiction are addressed, to providing discernment counseling, and only then to peaceful divorces.

Reducing family fragmentation won't happen tomorrow. In the meantime, there are some simple things which can be done to minimize its negative impact. To start, married parenting is supported by a whole spectrum of laws, institutions, and cultural expectations. Unmarried parenting needs the same support.

Our new Co-Parent Court in Hennepin County for low-income, unmarried parents is one example. Instead of just telling low-income fathers what their child-support obligations are, we offer co-parenting workshops that lead to the development of a parenting plan tailored to the parents' circumstances

as well as referrals for parenting-related basic services like health care and safe housing.

Another example is the responsible fatherhood movement and the rise of fathers' support groups of the kind now linked together in the Minnesota Network of Fathers and Families. Cultural norms have long recognized that a young man who marries and fathers children has an entirely new kind of lifestyle expected of him. That has not necessarily been the case for unmarried fathers, but the fatherhood groups are now teaching and modeling just what is expected of fathers, married or not.

I have been discussing with some fathers' advocates the development of a "Commitment to Parenting" ritual for unmarried parents that would have the same solemnity as a marriage ceremony and would give new parents a chance to pledge publicly their total support to their child and to their parenting relationship.

To raise the expectations for unmarried parents further, we should promote the widespread dissemination, especially in high schools, of the kind of sobering facts about the prospects for the children of unmarried parents that Mitch Pearlstein has reported.

We also must address the economic hardships of single parenting, especially since serious economic retrenchment is likely ahead for everyone. Having seen hundreds of divorcing family struggle with how to maintain two households with incomes that were stretched to maintain one, I have wondered why more single parents and children don't move in together. Such communal arrangements borne of increasing economic necessity for all of us might just provide the additional financial and emotional support children need.

The future is pretty cloudy right now, but it is going to look very different. There is great value in the work that Pearlstein, the contributors to this symposium, and many others are doing. As the future unfolds, we are becoming more properly focused on making sure it is child-friendly.

*Bruce Peterson has served on the Hennepin County District Court bench since 1999, most of that time in Family Court, for which he was the presiding judge from 2006 to 2008.*

## Losing Our Resolve to Partner

*by Todd Peterson*

Stop the fragmentation of adult couples and we solve the fragmentation of families. Thus, rather than lamenting the tragedy of fragmented children, fragmented parenting, and fragmented resources, let's fix the *adult* problem: We have, quite simply, lost our resolve to partner. Nearly 100 million adult Americans (more than 50 percent) are not married. In 1950 that rate was only 22 percent. Thirty-one million of us (27 percent of all U.S. households) now live alone.

That makes "adult living alone" the largest category of households in America, even larger than "single parent with child(ren)," "married with children," or "married without children," according to Eric Klinenberg, author of *Going Solo*. In short, it has become respectable—even desirable—to go solo in America. Young adults stay single longer, widows and widowers don't move in with their children, and divorcees increase in number and remarry less.

In almost every case, this decision to go solo abandons hefty savings—two people, one house, one mortgage. Those savings could be used to pay for more stable housing, more education, better health and nutrition, and a more secure retirement. Instead, we borrow all we can to fill the gap and then fall into the arms of our beloved government, rather than the arms of a partner, when we run out.

When one household breaks into two, the hardship is felt immediately. Middle-class adults find themselves unable to afford the same caliber house and extras that they still desire for themselves and their children. Bankruptcies befall those who don't downsize fast enough.



As for the lower-class, the experience of undereducated, unmarried teen mothers is obviously even worse. They face true poverty. Yet in a recent interview, Harvard's Kathryn Edin argues credibly that it is not for lack of desire that so many births occur without fathers: "The poor all say they want marriages like middle-class people have, marriages that will last." So even as we tinker with welfare reforms to reduce unintended teen pregnancy, let's keep our focus squarely on helping middle-class marriages to actually last.

If the economics argue for it and desire continues to pull for it, why is partnering so elusive? How can we help rebuild our resolve to partner, rather than run for the exits?

There definitely are legal dynamics at work. No-fault divorces have clearly lowered the barriers to exit. Lenders have even stepped in to fund this exiting process. There are plenty of lawyers to facilitate the sorting out process, as there needs to be, though the profession needs to set standards for how much a lawyer benefits from guiding the emotional fragmentation of a family.

However, it would be foolish to argue that archaic legal barriers should be reconstructed to bind one person to another. Enforced partnership is not nearly as healthy as the freedom to exit anytime. Making it more honorable to stay is the trick. We must reverse the shame that partners feel today for enduring "lifeless" partnerships when trusted observers too often advise them to leave and seek better.

Rather than raising the barriers to exit, we would be wise to lower expectations. One thing on which conservatives agree is that life is not easy, even though many a wedding starts with "Love, soft as an easy chair . . ." Ideals of love and intimacy should not stifle unromantic discussion of budgets and priorities. Good partnerships start with explicit discussions of challenges that must be expected along the way. Partners should certainly be told the legal details before they walk down the aisle rather than learning them the hard way at a divorce table. Then, by all means, strike up the band and let the

happy stuff begin.

Culturally we ought to celebrate great partnerships. I was delighted last year to discover *Working Together: Why Great Partnerships Succeed* by Michael Eisner and Aaron Cohen. They chronicle ten notable partnerships from Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger to Bill and Melinda Gates to Joe Torre and Don Zimmer. I hope there might be more books to celebrate romantic partnerships that last.

We could start even earlier with true home "economics" courses that point out the savings of partnering, let alone the glories of partnering. It's crazy that I never received such a basic lesson from junior high through Harvard Business School.

Let's set a policy goal to reduce solo living by, say, "20 percent by 2020", that would require 3 million additional partnerships. It certainly would reduce daily consumption of resources and position us for more effective partner-provided care in lieu of government-provided care.

Finally, to people who are serious about partnering, the state ought to grant the honorable title of "marriage." Churches can exercise their own standards for which partnerships merit the marriage title, but the state has a considerable interest in promoting partnership and eliminating all barriers to it. It's a very conservative goal.

*Todd Peterson is Managing Director of Spring House Capital.*

## Universal National Service and Unity

*by Larry Purdy*

America's great diversity has been an undeniable source of strength. Yet it also is sometimes blamed for our current divisiveness, particularly when a perceived clash in "core American values" is attributed to racial, ethnic, and/or class differences.

In reality, America has proved that highly diverse communities can share certain core values (e.g., honesty, industriousness, and recognition of the importance of marriage and religious faith) that extend across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

One of the central institutions passing these values along has been the family unit. Today, however, as noted by scholars including Mitch Pearlstein, the American family is shattering, which in the view of many, leads to a widening of the class divide. It is a view shared by noted intellectual Charles Murray.

In his most recent book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010*, Murray argues that the successful functioning of the American project has historically been based on four founding virtues: industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religiosity. As the title of his book reflects, America is in decline in ways that have little, if anything, to do with racial differences, have far more to do with class differences, and is almost entirely explained by our citizenry's decreasing commitment to the virtues mentioned. Without this commitment, the quest for the American ideal will wither. Indeed, the data Murray offers demonstrate the withering has already begun.

Thus, one question is, what do we do—what can we do—to mitigate the widening of the class divide caused by the effects of increasingly fragmented families?

I leave it to others to propose solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of fragmented families. Instead, I will focus on one discrete issue, which Pearlstein and American Experiment broadly describe as “splintered classes,” and offer one possible method of mitigating these class divisions.

Let me acknowledge at the outset that what I propose is not a popular idea with colleagues across the ideological spectrum, but that doesn't mean it won't work.

The proposal: Compulsory national service to be undertaken by every qualified citizen.

How would imposing a requirement for universal national service reverse the decline that Murray and others bemoan? What would such a policy look like?

To answer the latter question first, we can look to Switzerland and Israel. Both require a form of compulsory national service (in the case of Israel, on the part of virtually every citizen), with the default being service in the country's military or an alternative for those unqualified for military duty.

Roughly patterned after the Swiss and Israeli programs, conscription could begin in the United States at, say, age 19 and would require a U.S. citizen to remain available for service for a prescribed number of years during which regular annual drills would be mandatory (similar in nature to America's current reserve military or National Guard). The decision to pursue a full-time career as a professional soldier would remain voluntary.

Aside from the obvious benefit of providing much-needed manpower for national defense, I can think of several important benefits to society in general, though there are many others.

Perhaps foremost, service undertaken universally by all of America's youth, which begins with tough, often humbling treatment irrespective of race, ethnicity or class, would uniquely expose every participant to America's unparalleled diversity. At the same time, it would involve widespread exposure to America's consensus core values (to the extent such values or virtues, like those recited by Murray and others, truly exist).

To the extent that any of these virtues—say, industriousness and honesty, along with strong marriages reinforced by positive religious practices—are seen as leading to more successful societal outcomes, every participant would more than likely be influenced by them. This may particularly benefit the increasing number of young men and women who, prior to entering national service, were insufficiently exposed to some or all of these virtues, attributable, at least in part, to their families'



fragmented structure.

As virtually every veteran can attest, basic military training can be a great leveler. Frequently, those who undergo it emerge with an understanding that neither race nor class matter when it comes to successfully completing this often rigorous mental and physical training. Thereafter, during the months and years of service together focused on a common goal (national defense), lifelong bonds are created that can transcend race and class in ways that are all but unachievable in any other setting. Universal national service thus becomes at least one method of rendering existing class distinctions less important, if not meaningless.

Would the imposition of universal national service enhance our search for the American ideal? Can it reverse the reported decline in industriousness and honesty, even if it has no direct impact on marriage and religiosity? Would it, in fact, reduce class divisions?

There can be no guarantee, but why not add the concept of national service to the arsenal?

*Larry Purdy is an attorney in Minneapolis. He is a 1968 graduate of the United States Naval Academy and a veteran of the Vietnam War.*

## **Intellectual Capital and Achievement Gaps**

*by Jeremiah Reedy*

I read with great interest the series of articles in local papers this spring on the achievement gap that exists between white and Asian students on the one hand and blacks and Hispanics on the other. The only thing that surprised me was that I saw no mention of E.D. Hirsch, who is emerging as arguably the most important educational theorist and reformer of the last 100 years. His ideas regarding the achievement gap deserve careful attention.

Hirsch is a retired professor of English at the University of Virginia. In the late 1970s his interests began to shift from literature towards literacy and education, especially the teaching of reading, which I assume everyone will agree, is key to success in school.

Hirsch is critical of traditional educators, especially “progressive” educators (the followers of John Dewey), for what he calls “educational formalism”—that is, the belief that the content of education is arbitrary and that any content will do, as long as students are developing the desired skills. He is especially critical of the idea that reading is merely a set of skills (eye movements, guessing strategies, decoding techniques, etc.).

For a century or so, specialists in reading have overlooked the most important thing about reading, and that is to read with understanding, readers must have the background information that writers assume readers will have. All writers estimate what their readers know and what they do not know. Then, based on these judgments, writers decide what to explain and what not to explain. For instance, if one is writing for the general public in the United States today, and one mentions Jesus, it is not necessary to identify him as a “famous religious figure, founder of a movement called Christianity.” Likewise if one mentions Martin Luther King, one does not have to add “famous civil rights leader who was assassinated in 1968.” It is assumed that knowledge of these individuals is part of the background knowledge that contemporary readers bring to texts.

Hirsch calls the background knowledge readers must have to read with understanding “intellectual capital.” Some students come to school with more intellectual capital than others. Children from intact families tend to bring lots of intellectual capital to school. Their parents read to them and discuss current events over the dinner table. There are books in their homes. Their parents take them to museums, art galleries, zoos, and the like. On vacations, their families visit historical sites such as battlefields and the birthplaces of famous people.

Children from broken families tend to come to school with less capital. Just as people with lots of money find it easier to make more money than poor people do, children with lots of intellectual capital find it easier to learn than do those who lack it. Even so, the gap between children is not great in the earliest grades, but because the knowledge of those with intellectual capital grows exponentially, the achievement gap grows wider as the years and grades go by.

Strictly speaking, the achievement gap has nothing to do with race or ethnicity. It is the result of the differing amounts of intellectual capital, motivation, and discipline that students bring to school.

If the number of dysfunctional families continues to grow, the number of children entering school and lacking background knowledge for reading and learning will increase, and the achievement gap will continue to widen, no matter how much money society spends on schools. The consequences for individuals and society will be very dire indeed.

The situation is not, however, completely hopeless. What is needed is content-rich curriculum in the early grades to help children with little intellectual capital make up their deficit. Again, E.D. Hirsch has provided an answer.

Hirsch assumed that high school graduates should be able to read newspapers and magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*—certainly a reasonable expectation. Hence, he and his associates analyzed publications such as these, asking constantly what those who write for the general public today expect readers to know.

The result was a list of 5,000 items “all Americans need to know.” With the help of over 100 teachers, these items were divided into what kindergartners need to know, what first graders need to know, etc. The result is called the Core Knowledge curriculum, which is now used in over 1,000 U.S. schools, including in the Twin Cities Harvest Prep, Seven Hills Classical Academy, Parnassus Prep, and many others. The Core Knowledge curriculum can

narrow the achievement gap if teachers can motivate students to study and students are willing to work.

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## Getting Children off to Good Starts

*by Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald*

The theme of this symposium, “fragmented families and splintered classes and what it means for the United States and Minnesota,” overstates problems attributed to broken families and underemphasizes other conditions that affect well-being, human capital development, and ultimately economic performance. Furthermore, the role of policy in directly addressing family composition is unclear, whereas other research-based policies, specifically investing in early childhood education, have clearly demonstrated effectiveness and achieve a high public return on investment.

If a child has support for healthy development in families and communities during the first few years of life, he or she is more likely to succeed in school and to contribute to society as an adult. Responsive and consistent parenting is an essential ingredient to healthy child development. Without support during these early years, a child is more likely to have difficulty in school and as an adult earn lower wages or be incarcerated.

A number of adverse conditions can hamper healthy growth and development. One of these is a family breakup or a single-parent family. However, growing up in poverty, exposure to violence in the home, low maternal education attainment, parental incarceration, mental health problems, and substance abuse are among others. Thus, family breakup is but one of several conditions that can adversely affect

child development.

Looking beneath simple correlations between family structure and child outcomes shows that other family attributes, such as income and parental education attainment, have stronger associations with child outcomes than divorced and single-parent families. For example, according to Donna Ginther and Robert A. Pollak, once family income is accounted for, the effect of living in a single-parent family is no longer statistically significant.

With that said, a healthy marriage can help provide stability and financial advantages and reduce parental stress—all of which are beneficial to children of such married couples. While encouraging healthy marriages is a laudable goal, it's unclear that government can directly affect the number of healthy marriages. There isn't a readily available evidence-based set of initiatives that have demonstrated success in promoting healthy marriages.

What is clear is that all children, regardless of family composition, benefit from investments in early childhood education, with children facing adverse conditions having the most to gain. Furthermore, the benefits of early investments can be passed down to the next generation once these children reach adulthood and have their own families.

Four key longitudinal studies demonstrate that early childhood programs can have a positive, long-term impact on young children from low-income families. The studies used well-matched comparison groups and cost-benefit analyses that show annual rates of return reaching as high as 20 percent, adjusted for inflation.

Three of these studies pertain to center-based education combined with parent education and home visits. Benefits include higher education attainment, lower crime rates, and more financial stability as adults. Higher education levels are known to be consistent with delaying or reducing childbearing and lowering the probability of unplanned parenthood. The fourth long-term

study looks at the impact of a nurse-based home visiting program for at-risk expectant mothers. Now known as the Nurse Family Partnership, this program shows evidence that children associated with it had better school preparation and lower adolescent crime rates. Furthermore, their mothers had fewer subsequent pregnancies and higher employment rates.

While government may not have tools to promote healthy marriages directly, getting children off to a good start is one way policy can affect conditions for healthy parenting and marriage later in life.

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## Knowing What Makes Men and Women Tick

*by Deborah L. Ruf*

My husband and I have both been divorced. Neither of us is defensive about it anymore. Both of us now fully accept that we played a role in the failure of our earlier marriages. Poor communication and unspoken assumptions (leading to unspoken and unsatisfied expectations) were at the root of our divorces, as is the case for almost any divorcing couple.

Both of us divorced in the late 1980s. Neither of us had any idea how seriously divorce affects children. As Baby Boomers, we grew up in the age of women's liberation, equal rights, and wishful thinking that we and our children are better off when parents are happily apart rather than unhappily together. Both of us now accept that there were probably good ways and good reasons to save those marriages.

Many things changed in and since the 1960s: women's liberation, of course, but also birth control, no-fault divorce, and "free love"—a little more



wishful thinking showing the disconnect between sex differences, drives, and behaviors people didn't want to see or believe. There also was women's growing belief that, if they could get decent child support, it would be easier to raise their children without having to put up with *him*.

Just as a population where the male voice is too powerful suffers, a population where the female voice is too powerful suffers as well. Males and females contribute something to their children that is inherently different. This difference can be quite valuable. But when a parent sees the other parent as wrong, the former can be seen as undermining and belittling the latter, and the benefits to children of the respective wisdom and sensibilities of male *and* female can be lost.

Such is the case in the United States right now. Don't misunderstand me: The female voice is still not considered enough when it comes to leadership and policy decisions. Yet in many American homes and families, it is the female voice that guides child development. Balance is missing. Even when fathers are there, many of them have simply given up arguing with their wives about what's good for the children.

Many a woman has decided to have children without marriage because she hasn't found the "right" man and (in my opinion) seriously underestimates the importance of the father to her children. Modern women have been raised on high expectations of what a man should be like, but they haven't been raised on the truth of the differences between men and women. The men haven't been raised on the truth of these differences, either.

Why does it matter so much? Aside from the correlations between children of divorce and many negative real-life outcomes, what really is happening that's not good for children?

When parents divorce or women have children outside marriage, it is the female viewpoint that underpins the parenting approach and expectations. If the father isn't involved or present, his viewpoint can't come into play.

When children's parents are not together, the children are likely to feel less secure and, sadly, less important. When children have one parent who isn't very involved at all (or is completely absent), they are left with the question of their own value. "If I am not important enough to have my parent around and involved in my life, what's wrong with me? Why doesn't he/she care about me?"

An emotionally healthy, self-confident child needs someone to trust. If parents can't work out staying together and work together on behalf of their family, one or both of them eventually will look incapable, messed up, weak, or crazy enough that the child will no longer view the parent as someone whose advice and opinion should be valued or trusted.

When it comes to school behavior, far more girls than boys enjoy school and find it easy to behave and get good grades. Good grades and good behavior indicate you are good at doing what you're told to do. Boys really do have different interests and a different way of learning than girls, so doing what the teacher wants often runs counter to what they want to do. Thinking for oneself isn't prized in the school building, but it sure is a necessary skill in adulthood. Yet when our boys are raised more by a women's viewpoint than a man's, "normal boy behavior" can give them the idea that they're bad, that something's wrong with them, and that no one understands them. This isn't a great recipe for trusting women later, either.

I highly recommend that adults read about sex differences and that we start teaching about these differences in our middle and high schools. Right now, we are graduating students and throwing them into a world where they simply do not have enough information about what makes people tick.

*Deborah L. Ruf is an educational consultant with Educational Options and creator of the TalentIgniter™ parent inventory, the Ruf Estimates™ of Levels of Gifted Online Assessment.*



## Farsighted Philanthropies

by Terrence Scanlon

Only willful blindness could allow any of us to deny the harm, at the national and personal levels, of the progressive collapse of American families—a harm that especially strikes at the poor, minorities, and women. The overwhelming evidence of this truth is laid out starkly in such leading studies as Mitch Pearlstein’s *From Family Collapse to America’s Decline* and Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart*.

You need not be a social scientist to figure out that something is wrong. Quoting the 1930 book *Sex, Culture, and Myth* by one of the first great anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski, Murray writes, “Every culture . . . had a norm that ‘no child should be brought into the world without a man—and one man, at that—assuming the role of sociological father, that is, guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the rest of the community.’” Only for the last half-century in a few Western nations has this universal norm of civilization been ignored, and with devastating consequences.

Murray argues that a “hollow elite” in this country, unwilling to face the truth about America’s need for strong families, is largely to blame for our growing fragmentation. Yet I would point to an exception: In recent decades, one part of the nation’s elite has responded to this national calamity—namely, a handful of far sighted philanthropists who have supported a variety of efforts to strengthen American marriages and families.

The pioneers who blazed this philanthropic path include the Achelis and Bodman Foundations, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the William H. Donner Foundation, the JM Foundation, the Randolph Foundation, and the Scaife Family Foundation. David Popenoe, a pro-family scholar who benefitted from this philanthropy, has chronicled its evolution from its origins in the 1980s.

Even back then, the social science data showed overwhelmingly that children fare far better when

raised in an intact married family. Still, a large part of the academic community, and an even larger proportion of the media, refused to acknowledge this age-old truth, and thus the philanthropists and their grantees began working to change the cultural debate. Popenoe, for example, wrote a controversial article on the topic for the *Washington Post*, and, most famously, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead dropped a bombshell in 1993 when she wrote a cover story for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled, “Dan Quayle Was Right.”

The reference was to Vice President Dan Quayle’s criticism of the popular TV show *Murphy Brown*, whose title character had a child out of wedlock. The essay became one of the most talked-about articles ever published in the magazine, and the tide of public debate began slowly shifting. As the 1990s progressed, more family-strengthening groups began to spring up, funded by foundations willing to brave the criticisms that still swirled around anyone who admitted that all family types are not equal where children’s welfare is concerned.

One such group was the Council on Families in America, created by the Institute for American Values, whose major funders included the Achelis and Bodman, Bradley, and Earhart foundations and the Lilly Endowment. The Council wisely included prominent thinkers across the ideological spectrum, which helped it gain attention for its 1995 report *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation*. The Council insisted, “We must reclaim the ideal of marital permanence and recognize that out-of-wedlock childbearing does harm.” By 2000, the culture had shifted so sufficiently that both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates supported a “statement of principles” on marriage put together by the Institute for American Values.

In addition to these national debates, innovative donors were also investing in on-the-ground efforts to battle rising rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births. Perhaps the most impressive example of such work was “First Things First,” a Chattanooga nonprofit created after a group of Tennessee businessmen decided they had to do something about

the city's high rates of teen pregnancy, divorce, and fatherlessness. "We realized that the city's biggest problem was the breakdown of families and that every part of Chattanooga was being affected by it," Hugh O. Maclellan Jr. of the Maclellan Foundation told *Philanthropy* magazine.

Within a few years, the work of First Things First had helped to achieve significant, measurable improvements in Chattanooga's rates of family pathologies. The group succeeded in building a coalition that brought together citizens with a wide variety of political and religious views, working in everything from government and private social welfare offices to churches to schools to the courts to the media. Soon, other groups from across the country began efforts to replicate this model in other cities.

Thus, while our nation's family problems are still grave, in this area, as in others, we can find Americans in the philanthropic sector who have figured out how to fight the problem. As Popenoe concludes, "Only in America, where private foundations flourish, could this story have taken place."

The Philanthropy Roundtable has published a guidebook for donors interested in this work, *Reviving Marriage in America: Strategies for Donors*.

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## Teaching Frankly about Stable Relationships

by Nelson Smith

In the late 1980s, my shop at the U.S. Department of Education released a slim but alarming volume called *Youth Indicators*, that documented trends in family disintegration, academic stagnation, and souring economic prospects for Americans under

18 years old. In the ensuing quarter-century, some things have improved or stabilized (among them the divorce and dropout rates), but the decline of the intact family has accelerated. Mitch Pearlstein's *From Family Collapse to America's Decline* does a remarkable job of depicting the phenomenon and its consequences, and he's already been joined by a front-pager in *The New York Times* on the relationship between family disintegration and growing income disparities.

In 1988, we basically blamed everything on the 1960s, because that's when all the indicators started to plummet. Today, there seem to be many more explanations, and I'm less sanguine about cures. Whether it's drugs, the decline of organized religion, the flight of manufacturing, or the Internet, the causes of this continuing erosion are hard to reverse, and they interact with each other in ways that make any single-issue solution meaningless. All we know for sure is that more and more mothers (mostly) are struggling to raise children while holding down a job—if they can find one—and are having a heck of a time just getting by.

We also know that if a bigger share of the next generation is being raised under trying circumstances, we'll get worse and worse social and economic outcomes. You can trace a direct line from single-headed households . . . to poor academic performance . . . to dropouts . . . to the population groups suffering double-digit unemployment in the current economy. Morality aside, we can't afford to sideline more and more of our potential workforce like this and expect to compete in world markets.

So I have two basic thoughts about what to do. One I'm reasonably sure about; the other, not so much.

The nearly sure thing is education.

I line up with people who think education solves poverty, rather than being precluded by it. As an advocate for charter schools, I've seen plenty of evidence that intense, mission-driven schools can improve achievement dramatically among



low-income students, many from disintegrated households. Those kids should be the focus. They must get started as early as possible on becoming competent, job-holding, civic-participating, marriageable adults. Therefore, we must expand the number of public schools that prepare them well to succeed in college and work.

(I add one asterisk. We're just beginning to see meaningful long-term research on whether the students of "no-excuses" schools persist to and through college and to what extent they may still be hampered by family effects. The early returns are encouraging, but we must keep a close watch on outcomes and be ruthless in fine-tuning or scrapping whatever is not working.)

The second idea also relates to education, but this one is trickier. I think schools should be far more direct in preparing kids not just for success in college and career but in family, as well. There are many character-education programs that stress grit and persistence as well as honesty, courage, and other virtues. Putting these lessons into practice would help form the kind of adults who could be good spouses, parents, and breadwinners. Yet because there are such various family arrangements and schools quite commendably want to be inclusive, it's hard for educators to talk about family composition in a normative way or even to make assumptions about who's living at a student's home on any given day.

One problem here, and for me it's personal, is that "values" people have no problem asking public schools to preach their own values, and they tend to have a narrow concept of family—one that leaves out gay folks like me. Maybe we could get to some new norms if they were framed around evidence about the well-being of children. Reasonable people can agree that kids are more likely to do better in a household where two adults love them and have adequate resources and in a community that supports them.

Starting from there, could public schools teach frankly about the elements of stable relationships—

things like fidelity, patience, forgiveness, and sacrifice? I may be kidding myself, but a single mother might well enroll her kids in a public school that would teach them about doing right by your kids and honoring your family commitments—whatever their label.

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## **To Restore the Family: Privatize and Depoliticize**

*by David J. Theroux*

Throughout history, the foundation of civilization has always been the family, through which the bonds of community are formed, children are reared and educated, civic virtues are upheld, moral boundaries are secured, and the enduring cultural and legal institutions of free societies are rooted.

However, the spread of secularism in Western societies since the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries has resulted in the spread of moral relativism, along with the rise of powerful, secular nation-states, while religion and the traditional family have been increasingly viewed as obsolete, naïve, and even dangerous—in need of being controlled and even displaced by bureaucratic elites who seek to restructure communities around centrally planned schemes in education, welfare, housing, healthcare, employment, and law.

In the United States, the American family has never before been confronted with such powerful threats to its standing and stability. While many scholars agree that a loving mother and father in a healthy marriage are vital to the well-being of children, the nuclear family is under enormous assault in the academic and popular cultures, which disparage traditional morality and civil manners. Children are left unloved and without role models to nurture and protect them as they journey through adolescence

into adulthood and beyond. As a result, 85 percent of prison youths are from fatherless homes, as is the case with 72 percent for high school dropouts, 80 percent for rapists, and 63 percent for teenagers who commit suicide.

The welfare state rewards teenage girls with subsidies for raising children without fathers, and the breakup of family structures among the poor has been the result. The single-motherhood trend rapidly spread from the very poor into mainstream society, severing the connection between marriage and childbearing, producing fatherless homes and children prone to social pathologies like substance abuse, teenage suicides, and predatory behavior.

With single women having been subsidized by the government to raise children without men, the ill effects of the welfare state on women also now apply to unskilled, single men, who are enfeebled by losing incentives to work, who work fewer hours and for less money, and who receive fewer advancements than married men. This, in turn, can lead to increased mental health problems, higher rates of suicide, exacerbated family conflict and violence, and a sense of emasculation overall.

William Galston of the Brookings Institution and Elaine Kamarck of Harvard's Kennedy School have stated that the "The relationship [between single-parent families and crime] is so strong that controlling for family configuration *erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime*. This conclusion shows up time and again in the literature.

Along with the growth of the welfare state, marriage law itself has been socialized by state governments and, in the process, "no fault" has been substituted for the ability of couples to make and enforce their own private contracts, including provision for fraud, abuse, abandonment, and malfeasance. As a result, the definition of marriage itself is now uncertain as various jurisdictions have declared the traditional family no longer to be the standard, and what is called marriage is not what a couple agrees to in a marriage contract through private church and

other institutions but rather what is imposed by government edict.

As the welfare state has expanded, the family has declined and serious social problems have proliferated. With the rise of the welfare state, instead of aiding those in need to become fully productive family members and citizens, dependency and idleness have resulted instead.

So, what should be done now? The answer should include the following:

- Privatize and depoliticize marriage and marriage law so that traditional marriage is protected through private church and other institutions that would again be free to establish standards to educate and nurture couples and their families for life.
- End all welfare programs that subsidize family breakups of mother, father, and children. End all marriage penalties in the tax law and abolish all estate taxes. Reestablish time limits on welfare payments and private work requirements and then phase out all government welfare systems and eliminate restrictions on the re-creation of mutual aid societies, private charities, and other institutions to serve the needy. Reduce tax rates with the simultaneous elimination of the welfare state.
- Foster pro-marriage, pro-religion, and pro-family private institutions and messaging, especially for young people. Cultivate private reconciliation programs to restore broken families and encourage the establishment of families whose formation has been inhibited by government policies as described above.

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## Not Simply Choices among Flavors

by *Scott Uzzle*

America has experienced prolific changes over the past half century. Many of these changes are for the good and reflect a moral awakening in America. Most notably, the country has made great strides in combating racism and sexism; we are more tolerant than we once were. Other aspects of American culture, however, continue to suffer societal plagues: drug abuse, inequality of opportunities, violence, and the subject of this symposium, the breakdown of stable families. These are our moral failings.

There is a tendency to treat morality as if it were purely a matter of personal choice—as if how we behave and treat each other are simply choices among ice cream flavors that should be left to individual tastes. Not so.

Our moral bearings reflect our understanding of the world and the way that world works. They reflect our desire for justice, equality, happiness, and a commonwealth that shares these blessings of society with all its members.

That connection is obvious enough for some moral expectations. “Thou shalt not kill” reflects a respect for the rights of others and an equality that does not place some individuals below others.

For other moral rules, however, the connection is more complex and can be lost, due to the narrowness of contemporary experiences, especially among the comfortable middle class.

In past centuries, if a child was fortunate it was born to a couple that would care and provide for it, educate it either formally or informally, and prepare it for life.

If that child were less fortunate, he or she would be abandoned on the doorstep of an orphanage or end up as a starving urchin on the streets. In some parts of the world, the West included, that child’s neck might be snapped at birth, if the parents were not

ready to be parents. Its life, more likely than not, would be rough, brutish, and short. That child’s suffering would be the direct result of someone else’s private moral choice to engage in the act of child creation while shirking the child that resulted. Sexual morality was not mere sexual prudishness. Thankfully, street urchins and foundlings belong to an earlier era; the terms have an obsolete, Dickensian feel to them.

Today, the world is kinder. We do not ostracize the single mother. We provide for the education of all children. We use the force of law to obligate the deadbeat dad to provide financially for his children. If the father and the mother are unable to provide for their child, then the state will pay to provide the necessities for the fruit of their private sexual choices. These are all good; they help prevent and relieve the suffering of those of tender years who find themselves in situations of others’—their parents’—makings.

At the same time, they have the effect of disguising the harm of personal choices. Today, we do not see foundlings on doorsteps or barefoot orphans wandering the streets. Our society becomes tolerant of more permissive coital behavior; separating the cause from the effect. While not as dire as it once was, the lot of non-marital children is not enviable. A single parent has less time and usually less money to dedicate to the child than do two parents; the single parent may tax the grandparents’ labor and wealth to compensate for the deficit left by the absent parent. The obligations of single parenthood toll not only upon work and education but also upon finding and establishing a committed relationship. The net effect, writ large over society, is poorer communities and more limited opportunities, for both parents and children. This does not bode well. These are still the poisoned fruits of the personal and moral choices of individuals. If we wish to combat poverty, we need to recognize this. No number of government programs can bind up this wound.

Its ultimate effects, however, depend upon America’s willingness to face hard truths. Can we discuss respectfully and honestly how family breakdowns and the lack of committed relationships hurt men,

women, children and communities? Can we discuss it not in terms of prudishness, but in terms of tangible harms to individual people?

We have come to grips with some of the uglier sides of our history—slavery, racism, and exploitation—and we have wrestled with them. We have taken responsibility for behaviors once socially acceptable and now rejected as loathsome because of the harm they visit upon innocents. We must close the logical loop between personal actions, the perpetuation of poverty, and social ills. For this, there is no legislative remedy. It requires a paradigm shift.

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## Even after Years of Government Involvement

*by Jim Van Houten*

Social scientists have long been in agreement that there is a strong relationship between economic opportunity and marriage. Read sociologist William Julius Wilson, for example. With increased female employment and job opportunities, the obvious advantages of two earners in a family are well understood by the public.

Equally well accepted, but less common in public policy, is the proved inverse of the above cause and effect. Specifically, while marriage increases the chance of financial success, financial success also increases marriage. Recent research goes so far as to predict that the line graphing marriage rates against 20 personal income categories is almost linear and upward.

Social scientists also have studied why the well-understood financial benefits of marriage have not reversed the upward trends in single parenthood. The conclusion from one recent study is that single women understand the financial benefits but also that not all marriages result in these benefits; thus, single women often conclude that their potential

partners would not improve their situation.

Decisions to marry or not are shaped, in part, by poor economic conditions, resulting in fewer men with work histories and positive earning potential; high crime rates, which increase the number of men with criminal records, again resulting in poor prospects for earning; increases in the size of governmental safety nets, thus making partners less necessary; and a generally more promiscuous society. Research also indicates that the promiscuity effect has reduced males' interest in marriage.

Finding it difficult to reduce family fragmentation directly, the government has attempted two major strategies to mitigate its effects. The first has been to increase government transfer payments. Despite poor outcomes, state and federal means-tested welfare spending under the current administration increased a staggering 24.3 percent from 2008 to 2010, without a reduction in the portion of single-parent families in poverty. Although the 1996 welfare reform work requirements placed some restrictions on long-term dependency, the overall results have been disappointing.

The second major strategy focuses on educational achievement as a factor in reducing poverty. Increased federal involvement and spending in education have helped spur a doubling of the number of elementary and secondary teachers since 1970 while the student count increased by less than nine percent. Although teacher unions still argue that the spending increase was too modest, the data are clear: Education outcomes, as measured by standardized tests, do not improve directly in response to increasing spending. Therefore, it has become obvious that the present education system alone will not offset the negative effects of family fragmentation.

The frustrating conclusion is that family fragmentation—through divorce and single parenthood—remains causally related to poverty, even after decades of government policy and spending.



It also seems evident that there is no quick fix, since family fragmentation is caused by the macroeconomic factors of an inadequate number of job-skilled men available for marriage and an excess of other men unemployable due to criminal records. Both these problems are also exacerbated by fewer job opportunities during the current economic downturn; personal factors such as single women choosing not to marry; reduced need for second incomes due to expanded welfare benefits; and increased promiscuity altering the attitudes of both men and women toward family formation.

Given these conclusions, it seems that the most effective government policies would target strategies that (1) quickly motivate the private sector's investment in job creation through the expansion of the general economy; and (2) reduce transfer payments gradually but irreversibly for all except those in difficulty through no fault of their own.

Government tactics in providing support might include incentives and counseling for improving job readiness. In education, tactics might include changing education funding so as to reward providers with the best learning outcomes as well as funding students rather than buildings.

*Jim Van Houten is a retired president and CEO of the MSI Insurance Companies and a former American Experiment director.*

## Weak Voices and Weak Models

*by Lou Wangberg*

Why is an icon for virtue like the family universally dysfunctional? Every family is dysfunctional on some level, and it is nothing new. It's easy to imagine, three million years ago, cavemen occasionally clubbing their wives and worse. In the Bible, the first parents saw their son Cain slay his brother Abel.

Traditional families with a mother, father, and children do exist but are increasingly rare. The

reality is that, with upwards of half of marriages ending in divorce, many children will live in a single-parent household sometime before they turn 18. The number of foster-care homes has soared. An increasing number of children are born into families in which a single parent has never been married. There is an inevitable move toward gay marriage, and gay parenting is common. Add to that adoption and blended families as well as any number of other arrangements, all often complicated by the welcomed or un-welcomed involvement of family members from previous relationships. What a mess.

How do we deal with the hypocrisy and contradiction in worshiping at the altar of family perfection when little to none actually exists and never will? What public policies can and should be supported? Moral judgment does not work. Diverse definitions of family are here to stay. We never have institutionalized and never will institutionalize the ideal family. It is time to stop wasting our efforts trying to achieve the impossible. Instead, we must focus on meeting the needs of all variations of the "family" we have come to accept.

In all of life, the most significant solutions begin at home. Clearly, we must do a better job as a society in providing the tools and education for families to heal themselves. Often, the worst family situations develop from ignorance or neglect. How do you learn to be an effective parent or spouse/partner if you have never seen it done and there is no support for you to grow into practices that build instead of destroy? On the whole, we underestimate the power of modeling.

In the 1950s, television featured unrealistic programs like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*. Unrealistic as they were, they did show us what ideally functioning families might look like, and in that way they served an enlightened, if distorted, purpose. Unfortunately, our entertainment selections today present a more conflicted set of models. *Will and Grace* and *Modern Family* have presented gay life in a positive way, but at the same time shows like *Two and a Half Men* glorify an immoral lifestyle. Which



has the greatest influence? Which model do we follow? From what source does one learn to be a better spouse/partner and parent?

In previous generations, emotional and physical problems were most often solved within the family itself. If the family could or would not solve problems, the next place people turned was the enabling institutions—churches, schools, clubs, lodges, charitable organizations, and so on. With the arrival of the Progressive Movement, governments began to play a larger role and provide support and services where the enabling institutions did not reach. The Great Depression saw the explosion of welfare efforts. Since then, the number and magnitude of intervention programs has grown astronomically.

Today, more than one in three Americans lives in a household that receives Medicaid, food stamps, or other means-based government assistance. When Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment benefits are included, nearly half of the nation lives in households that receive government checks. Surely, totally living off the government cannot be okay.

What, then, would be a solution? For one thing, we need charismatic and influential leaders. Ours is a society adrift, with weak voices and models to follow. While words can sometimes be hollow, it is essential that people of stature and wisdom speak out in a fashion we can follow.

We must increase the threshold for using government programs. While many programs serve a humane purpose in alleviating financial crisis and other adversities, they should not be permanent. The rules should be set for each intervention to encourage a transition back to more individual responsibility. We should make eligibility rules difficult and limit the time and size of support that is provided. By trying to do good, we inadvertently do harm. We create a class and generation of dependent people. We should provide counseling and incentives to leave government programs and develop a national culture that says it is not acceptable to be a permanent ward of the state.

We should uplift the enabling institutions. This is not easy, but it would solve a host of problems. We can do some of this through tax and incentive policies. The rhetoric of our officials can affect this. The initiatives of individual groups within communities can be improved and become more proactive. We must talk about what is right and necessary in society with a new and passionate language.

We should raise the importance of modeling. Elected leaders and candidates must be expected to raise the national dialogue. A more enlightened entertainment industry can make better choices of the imagery we see in our media. We must demand higher-minded programming. Entertainment stars and personalities have a huge impact on fans. If the language and behavior of these icons were to promote positive practices about what is okay, it would be transformative.

These ideas are not sweeping or revolutionary. Expanded definitions of family and parenting did not happen overnight. Making dysfunctional families more functional will also not happen easily or quickly. Still, we must begin somewhere.

The most important change we can make is to have a new definition of what is acceptable. We must alter our language so that what is desirable and acceptable will reflect higher aspirations. When our words and actions collectively communicate to our family, friends, and neighbors that only values of making the family better and more effective will be alright, our nation can begin to heal.

*Lou Wangberg, a former Minnesota Lieutenant Governor, currently teaches in Florida at both the doctoral and high school levels.*



# The Bill has Arrived

by *Stephen B. Young*

The price we Americans pay for what this set of essays calls “fragmented families” will not occur sometime in the future. The bill has arrived, and we are already poorer—economically and politically—for our wayward ways of family socialization of citizens.

America is in a political crisis because it is unable to govern itself, as shown by having no federal budget adopted for each of the last three fiscal years. America is also in an economic crisis, resulting in slow growth, a hollowed-out middle class, and a debt-to-earnings ratio much too high, because it has a trust deficit.

Because few in positions of formal authority, public and private, are trusted much, there is no effective leadership for the country—only a vulgar careerism creeping in everywhere and a kind of modern tribalism in politics, both of which draw upon a well of deeply set narcissism at the individual level.

As Francis Fukuyama has warned, without trust there can be no success in constitutional politics or national economic growth.

What has happened to the great American experiment, once the envy of mankind?

Simply put, fragmentation of families, accompanied by growing internal dysfunction in the families that don't fragment in their living arrangements, has led to a sociopsychological process that has undermined our character. Without good character, there can be no trust worth its name.

Starting with the psychosocial revolt of the Baby Boomers against their parents and traditional authority, parenting skills in American have been in decline. The link between failure of parenting at the family level and a structural national decline is easy to show.

The evidence for a decline in character is all around us, yet we do not see it. Much has been written for 30 years about the excesses of the “Me Generation” but little done to reform it. Under the cultural pressures of that generation, American debt in capital markets has grown from roughly 125 percent of national earnings to 350 percent of those earnings by March 2008, thus bringing on the housing price bubble and the collapse of credit markets. This accumulation of debt was accomplished while median incomes for families were rising only slightly over 30 years and median wages for full-time employed males were stagnant. Only a culture without virtue would be so self-destructive in enthusiastically embracing such high levels of debt.

Social trends such as obesity in adults and children, high levels of dependency on medications and chemicals of various sorts, including alcohol and illegal drugs, attention deficit disorders in children, mediocre academic performance in schools, and incivility in politics all reflect poor personal decision-making skills among too many contemporary Americans. This, in turn, is the result of not having resolute character.

The Me Generation ushered in the highest divorce rates in our history. It was frequently quipped, and I have seen no data to refute the insight, that many first divorces among Baby Boomers came a few years after children had been born, as the reality of parenting responsibilities sank in and some parents (mostly fathers) packed it in and ran away from the hard work of raising children well. In general, as parents, Baby Boomers had little inner self-confidence in their values and right to be an authority over their children. They were too self-referential to reach out to traditional values and family patterns as norms for their parenting. Marriage to them was rather a “Me” thing and less creation of a “We” community of mutual commitment.

What can be done? Very simply, we can raise our children to be virtuous, with all children, regardless of race or religion or ethnic origin, held to the same standard of personal character.

Adam Smith, among many, set out the dynamic of fostering the moral sense in each of us in his thorough consideration of human nature, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. Smith pointed to the need to guide individuals towards self-control and prudence and away from temptation. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and St. Thomas Aquinas had preceded Smith in making such recommendations.

Societies such as ours, which are governed by process and not ideology or theocracy, depend on respect for the law for their legitimacy and on the good intentions of their citizens to assume responsibility for the process to lead to good outcomes. For centuries, this community-sustaining capacity for effective citizenship was called virtue.

Thus, we start with the need for virtue in a republic.

There was a day when public schools were expected to develop good character in their students and

when parents stood behind teachers who upheld high standards of respect and performance in the classroom. Those were also the days when teaching civics and history to young Americans was highly valued because such teaching was preparing them to be citizens in a republic.

There was a day when it was the acknowledged responsibility of parents to raise their children to have good character.

Parents are central to the formation of moral sentiments in each person. That core can become the basis for building virtue among us all. Families are the values core of any republic. Therefore, parents, who sustain families, need guidance, support, and a sense of duty well done.

*Stephen B. Young is Global Executive Director of the Caux Round Table, founding chair of Center of the American Experiment, and former dean of the Hamline University Law School.*



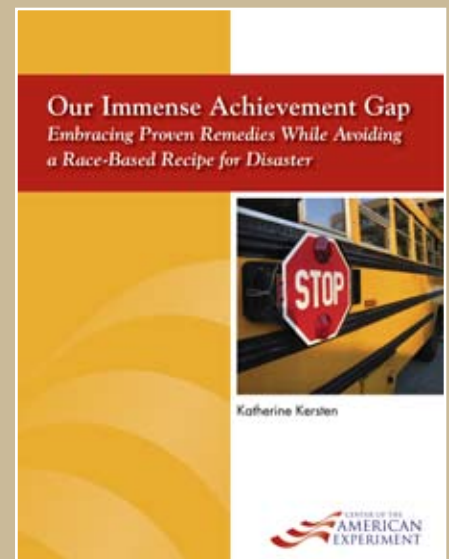
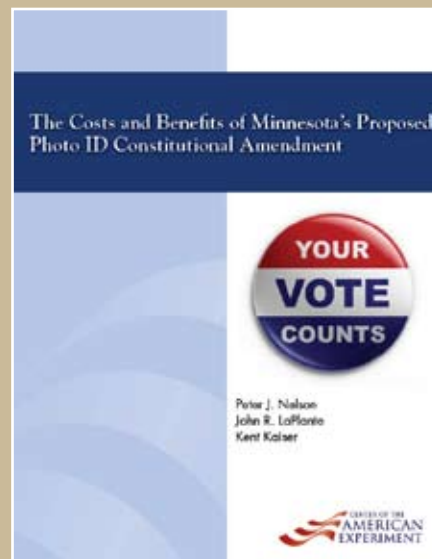
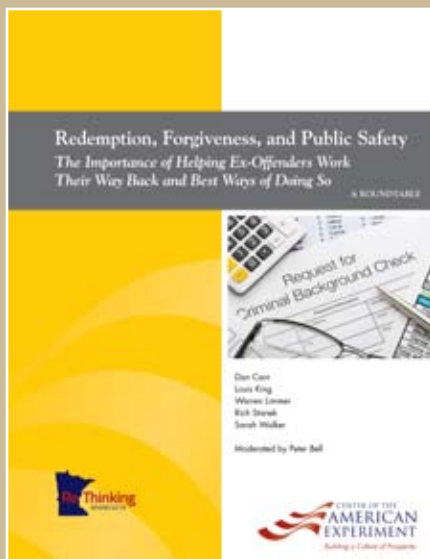


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