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ON OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURE

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The Future of Love and Family in America

Peter Ulric Tse

We tend to forget in the heat of our political and cultural debates over, for example, whether to allow gay marriage or prayer in school that most of us agree on our core family values. Liberals and conservatives agree on how important honesty, love, hard-work, and responsibility are to making a marriage succeed. We agree that perseverance, wisdom, fairness, and an emphasis on education are essential to raising children well. Of course, there are real differences: liberals argue that a gay couple or single mother can be loving and responsible; conservatives stress the importance of a mother at home when children are small. But because it is our differences that irritate us, we tend to be blind to the ethical core that unites us. What should concern every American is the decay of that core in our society and in ourselves. There has been a marked decline in the core values that hold families together in the past few decades, and the result has been the fragmentation of the American family.
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In this essay I will explore present trends of marriage, divorce, and family life. I will begin by reviewing some of the statistics that reveal the extent of fragmentation in American families, and then I will explore the deeper social, emotional, religious, cultural, and economic reasons for the weakening of marriage, family, and community in America. I will close with some personal views, and predictions on where we are going as a society.

Facts about the American Family

Since alternative family arrangements are a natural consequence of the individual freedoms Americans value, legal and popular definitions of "family" will most likely adapt to the reality of diverse family types. A modern-day family might have a single parent or span several households and involve a complicated web of emotions and step-relatives. Just as the nuclear family replaced the traditional extended family this century, a quasi-extended family of relatives and step-relatives could well replace the nuclear family in the next century as the dominant family type, assuming present trends continue.

In the following several sections, I will review the state of the American family. I will in turn summarize the state of (1) marriage, (2) out-of-wedlock births, (3) single motherhood, (4) divorce, (5) children of divorce, and (6) domestic violence. In later sections I will describe the immediate and deeper causes underlying these social dislocations.

Marriage

While lifelong marriage will remain the ideal of most Americans, the facts are that cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage have become so common as to approach a standard pattern. The ideal in the 1950s of a husband working outside the home to support a homemaker wife and their children is becoming increasingly rare. Less than eight percent of families are now of this type (Robertson 1981: 366). Remarriage is becoming so common that in about one out of seven marriages either the bride or the groom is marrying for at least the third time (Graham 1996: 49).
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Young people are increasingly postponing marriage. In 1960, 28 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 had never married. In 1980, that percentage was 45 percent, and in 1989, it was over 60 percent (Cherlin 1992: 9).

More and more people are living alone. In 1981, one fifth of all households consisted of just one person, a rise of 40 percent over the previous decade (Robertson 1981: 367). Although many of these people will eventually marry, an increasing number of people will never marry. If current trends persist, more than ten percent of people will remain single their whole lives in the twenty-first century.

Out-of-Wedlock Births
The increase in out-of-wedlock births, especially among teenage girls, is dismaying. Currently, approximately 30 percent of children are born out of wedlock, compared to 5 percent in 1960 (Horn 1995). 700,000 babies were born to single white women in 1991, representing 22 percent of all births. Currently about seven out of ten black children are born out of wedlock. Since the corresponding number of out-of-wedlock black births in the early 1960s was about what the white rate is today, it is possible that white out-of-wedlock birthrates will increase dramatically in the next thirty years. Some conservatives (e.g., Murray) fear that this would lead to the emergence of a white underclass.

Single Mothers
Earlier this century, it was common for divorcing parents to send children away to stay with relatives; today most children stay with their mother. Whereas about 5 million children lived with only their mother in 1960, more than threefold that number do so now (Saluter). Nearly 40 percent of American children do not live with their biological father (Blankenhorn 1995). In 1990, 6.6 million households were headed by a single woman. This is double the number in 1970. Just under 5 million of these single mothers had children under the age of eighteen (Cherlin 1992: 69). About half of these children will spend at least five years in a fatherless household before they turn eighteen or their mothers remarry (Cherlin 1992: 26).

Poverty is becoming increasingly concentrated in homes led by single mothers. About a quarter of American women get
pregnant as a teenager, and four fifths of teen pregnancies are premarital (Robertson 1981: 367). Half of the 463,000 teenagers who had a baby in 1988 were below the poverty line and unmarried (Cherlin 1992: 137). Whereas 15 percent of the poorest fifth of all families in the late 1940s were headed by a single woman younger than 65, the corresponding figure for the mid-1980s was 35 percent (Levy 1987; Cherlin 1992: 91). Nearly half of unwed mothers go on welfare by their child’s first birthday. By the time the child is five years old, 72 percent of white unwed mothers and 84 percent of black unwed mothers have received public assistance (Garrison 1994). According to the 1980 census, 9 percent of children living with two married parents lived below the poverty line, compared with 47 percent living only with their mother (Sweet and Bumpass).

The poverty of single mothers is partly due to the delinquency of ex-husbands. Only a quarter of divorced women receive child support. Nearly half of fathers who are ordered to pay child support simply ignore court orders (Robertson 1981: 365). According to the 1981 National Survey of Children, half of children living with divorced or separated mothers had not seen their fathers in the previous year (Cherlin 1992: 79). Among those divorced mothers who did receive child-support in 1989, the average amount was only $3,322. While divorced and separated women typically experience a 30 percent drop in their standard of living in the year after their marital breakup, men experience a 10 percent to 15 percent rise in theirs because they no longer fully support their ex-wives and children (Cherlin 1992: 73).

**Divorce**

Half or more of all couples marrying for the first time in 1997 will divorce. Most of these divorces will occur by 2003. Divorce is especially common among urban couples, couples who marry very young or after only a brief acquaintance, and among those whose friends or relatives disapprove of the marriage (Robertson 1981: 365). While approximately 89 percent of American women born in 1970 are projected to marry, about 50 percent of those who do marry will divorce, 34 percent will divorce and remarry, and 18 percent will divorce for a second time (Cherlin 1992: 67-
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More than a million couples separate or divorce each year in America.

Children of Divorce
Children are the silent victims of divorce. More than half of all divorces involve children. While children may often function better in a single-parent family than a dysfunctional two-parent family, divorce is nonetheless traumatic for all involved. Although most children return to a normal course of development after an initial period of emotional turmoil, some do not. The effects can be long lasting. In a ten-year follow-up to an earlier study, boys who had been between the ages of 9 and 19 at the time of their parents' marital breakup, were found to be lonelier and less successful at forming lasting love relationships than a control group. Similarly, women who had been 9 to 13 reported that they were afraid of making an emotional commitment to a man (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989). Compared with children raised in intact families, children of divorce are more likely to drop out of school and get pregnant out of wedlock (Furstenberg and Teitler).

Domestic Violence
For many Americans, home life is violent. In 1994, over 3 million children were reported for abuse or neglect to the U.S. Child Protective Service (CPS), representing a 4.5 percent increase over the number of children reported in 1993, and a 63 percent increase in reporting since 1985. Of these, CPS substantiated over a million cases of child abuse in 1994. Of confirmed cases, physical abuse comprised 21 percent, sexual abuse 11 percent, neglect 49 percent, and emotional maltreatment 3 percent. More than three children die each day as a result of abuse or neglect. Almost ninety percent of these are under the age of five, and almost half are under the age of one. About 45 percent of children who are killed are known to CPS as current or prior clients (Wiese and Daro, 1995).

One reason violence may be on the rise within homes is that families increasingly involve children and parents not related by blood. Depending on age, a child can be as much as a hundred times more likely to be abused or killed by a step- or
adoptive parent than a biological parent (Daly and Wilson 1988: 86–90).

American homes have been violent for years. One sociologist (Robertson 1981: 353) gave the following statistics as long ago as 1981: About a fifth of murders in the United States are committed by a relative, half of these by a spouse. Each year about 7.5 million couples experience a violent episode in which one member tries to injure the other physically. Wives and husbands assault each other with about equal frequency and are equally likely to kill each other. Wives are more likely to use deadly weapons, such as kitchen knives. When death is not the outcome, wives are far more likely to be brutalized, and as the O.J. Simpson trial made clear, wife-beating is common at all income levels of society. About 2.3 million children pull a gun or knife on a sibling every year. Parents kick, punch, or bite about 1.7 million of their children a year, batter 760,000, and assault 46,000 a year with a knife or gun. Child abuse, whether beating, sexual abuse, forced confinement, or psychological abuse, is often the cause of the more than two million runaways a year.

The Immediate Causes of Family Breakdown

A combination of several factors has resulted in the weakening of family cohesiveness in the United States. In this section I will describe what I regard to be the immediate causes of the breakdown: 1. the liberation of women; 2. the sexual revolution; 3. An acceptance of divorce; 4. Economic changes; and 5. the decline of religion. The deeper causes that underlie these will be explored in the following section.

The Liberation of Women

Foremost among immediate causes is probably the economic and sexual liberation of women. Women no longer need to stay in an unhappy marriage because marriage is no longer necessary for economic survival or sexual satisfaction. Social and institutional pressures to stay married have waned. Wives who are not emotionallly or sexually fulfilled by their husbands may not have as much incentive to stay with a husband who has become undesirable as in times past, when the consequences of
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divorce, for women, in particular, were more dire. This is reflected in the statistic that divorce proceedings are initiated by women approximately twice as often as by men (Monthly Vital Statistics Report, May 21, 1991). While our society remains male-dominated in most of its extra-familial power relationships, family power increasingly tends to fall along matriarchal lines, as women tend to initiate divorce, tend to keep the children and house after divorce, and ever more commonly tend to raise and have children without the biological father present. While no one should have to stay in an unhealthy relationship, and each divorcing wife surely has deep personal reasons for dissatisfaction with her husband, whether infidelity, abuse, or emotional disconnection, the fragmentation of the American family remains in part an unintended consequence of women’s newfound financial, legal, sexual, and familial power.

Although the women’s movement has enhanced the lives of millions of Americans and made America a more just society, many American men and women have yet to find a way to coexist happily in a more equal relationship. Since there is no going back to the 1950s, when women were typically limited to the role of homemaker, American men and women are groping in uncharted territory in working out their personal relationships. Many men maintain patriarchal behaviors and attitudes that express themselves in countless small ways, from not helping with the dishes to not changing diapers, and women are no longer so accepting of traditional roles or injustices. The patriarchal ethic that governed family life for millennia in the West and underlay family stability has largely collapsed, but a new source of family stability has yet to emerge to replace it, if, indeed, one will.

The Sexual Revolution

The sexual liberation permitted by the widespread use of the birth-control pill and other contraceptives since the 1960s has been a key factor contributing to the high rate of divorce. People have more premarital partners than they did in the 1950s, and this probably leads to higher expectations of sexual satisfaction and variety. Romantic love may become more conditional as each sexual partners’ attributes are measured up against those of past lovers. With the responsibilities and dangers of preg-
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nancy effectively eradicated by contraception and abortion, sex can be enjoyed for its own sake. As a sexually open and at times promiscuous ethic has become widespread, feelings of responsibility regarding personal sexual behavior have waned. Sex has become separated from love and commitment for some people. If people bring this ethic with them into a marriage it may be that love, commitment, and feelings of responsibility suffer.

Cohabitation has become so common that a majority of people born this year will probably live with a potential spouse before marriage. Nearly half of young adults in the 1990s cohabit with someone before marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1988). This is a revolution in sexual behavior, given that even during the counterculture decade between 1965 and 1975, only 11 percent of people who married had cohabited beforehand (Cherlin 1992: 12). Since cohabitation has the benefit of allowing partners to test their compatibility, one might expect marriages that follow cohabitation to fare better than marriages that do not. In fact, marriages that follow cohabitation are approximately one third more likely to end in divorce (Cherlin 1992: 15). Cohabitation involves the lifestyle of marriage without the commitments of marriage. Either partner can back out at any time without legal repercussions, although successful palimony suits since 1977 suggest that many of the legal consequences of marriage are being extended to cohabitation. Couples who marry after having lived together may bring a more noncommittal attitude with them to the marriage than couples who have not cohabited, making divorce more likely.

Acceptance of Divorce

The stigma once associated with divorce has largely disappeared as divorce has become more common. This has resulted in and perhaps also resulted from the spread of no-fault divorce laws that make it easier to divorce. Divorce may become even easier in coming years as prenuptial agreements that lay out the terms of potential divorce become increasingly accepted as a type of insurance policy. Indeed, divorce has become such a lucrative business for lawyers, judges, property appraisers, and others, that we may soon see lawyers advertising in search of divorcing clients, much as we now see lawyers advertising for clients
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who want to sue because of injuries. Divorce will probably also
be facilitated by the spread of Las Vegas-style marriage and
divorce drive-throughs (1-800-DIVORCE already exists).

Economic Changes
The changing nature of the economy has also hurt family cohe-
siveness in America. When people move to where the jobs are,
community ties can weaken. In its extreme form, common in
many suburbs, neighbors hardly know each other. There has
been increasing financial stress on families and individuals as
high paying blue-collar jobs have left for the third world, and
taxation, inflation, and rising insurance, tuition, housing, and
medical costs have eaten away at family income. Inflation-ad-
justed family income has remained stagnant since the 1973 oil
shock ended postwar wage growth (Levy 1987). Median family
income in 1947 expressed in 1990 purchasing power was $17,689,
and in 1973 it was $35,379. In 1984 the corresponding figure
was $33,162, and it has remained essentially unchanged since
then, even though the richest in society have become much
richer. Although many more women were contributing income
in 1984 than in 1973, this figure represented a 6 percent decline
(Cherlin 1992: 127–28). The stagflation of this era created fi-
nancial and emotional stress within families as standards of
living declined. Women who once fought for the right to work
in jobs that traditionally belonged to men, found that they had
to work in these jobs to keep their families in the middle class.
Other factors bringing women into the labor force included
higher wages for women, and women’s ambitions to have both a
career and a family. The overwhelming stresses of having a
full-time job and running a household have been too much for
many married men and women to handle. These stresses have
only worsened as both corporate downsizing and managerial
attitudes that emphasize short-term productivity have made
employees feel that they cannot afford to spend time with their
families. Parents work more than they did twenty years ago,
and spend less time with each other and their children. Not
surprisingly, family cohesiveness suffers.

The financial freedom and stress of work have also contribu-
ted to the weakening of family bonds. The more financially
independent a woman is, the more likely she is to leave an un-

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happy marriage, and women have been becoming increasingly independent financially. In 1940 about a quarter of women worked outside the home (Robertson 1981: 366), and about a seventh of married women whose husbands were present were working or looking for work. In 1989, nearly six out of ten married women were working or looking for work. The increase in labor force participation has been greatest for women with children, particularly those with preschool children. This used to be the group that was least likely to work outside the home. In 1949, only 11 percent of women with preschoolers worked outside the home. In 1989, the corresponding figure was 58 percent, and the labor participation rate for women with children between ages six and seventeen was close to 75 percent (Cherlin 1992: 49–50).

The Weakening of Religion
There are deep historical reasons for the weakening of religion, ranging from the ascendancy of the materialistic worldview of science, to the rise of an affluent middle class that would prefer to transcend personal suffering by using credit cards rather than endure the effort and asceticism of a spiritual path. The church itself has often failed to offer real spiritual guidance. Stories of child-molesting priests or hypocritical evangelizers hardly raise an eyebrow anymore. Whereas local religious leaders used to offer moral guidance and constraints on individual behavior, this is increasingly not the case. While organized religion remains strong in America, the influence of consumeristic attitudes, whether from consumeristic media or deconstructionistic academia, has weakened the role of religion in many people’s lives. Many people seek out meaning and spiritual fulfillment on their own or not at all. More often than not, people are content to act selfishly when there are few external constraints against their doing so.

The Deep Causes of Family Breakdown

The immediate causes of family breakdown described above are expressions of deeper causes that lie inside our hearts and minds. Our selfishness and lack of wisdom about how to live well, and our lack of knowledge about our own minds have frag-
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mented our personal, family, and community lives. In the past
we were constrained from acting selfishly by moral institutions
and public and private moral standards. Now, in the relative
absence of such constraints, we are free to act selfishly and reck-
lessly. Below I describe what I regard to be the three deepest
causes of family breakdown: selfish individualism, our misun-
derstanding of what it means to be free, and our human biologi-
cal/psychological make-up.

Selfish Individualism
The American family is weakening because of an individualism
that is dedicated to self-development, self-gratification, and self-
fulfillment. This attitude is one of the dominant themes of
American culture, and an attitude encouraged under consumeristic
capitalism: if the product is unsatisfactory, discard it and look
for a better one. This attitude expresses itself as a quest for
self-fulfillment and emotional satisfaction within the romantic
relationship. We expect to fulfill our needs for sex, love, and
family through our partner. We tend to be more concerned with
our personal happiness than duties to our spouse, children, rela-
tives, neighbors, friends, or strangers. When we feel unhappy
we want out. We feel we deserve more and could do better. And
when someone better comes along, we often leave.

The intensity of the husband-wife relationship is height-
ened by the relatively weak connections we share with relatives
and neighbors. When taboos against divorce fade, and when
men and women can survive on their own financially, and when
marriage is not necessary to survive, as it was for the pioneers,
emotional satisfaction often becomes the main reason for stay-
ing with a spouse. Without the economic or social pressures
that existed in the past, marriage has become a love union much
more so than perhaps any time in history. While basing a mar-
rriage on love, emotional connection, and personal satisfaction is
no doubt a healthy ideal, it is often an unstable basis for lifelong
partnership, since feelings of romantic love and emotional or
sexual fulfillment tend to come and go. Without a sense of duty
and commitment, no marriage can last the inevitable tough
times.

Although some people admire the family structure of the
1950s, that era was in its own way as individualistic as is our
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own. Before World War II it was common for relatives to live with or near each other. Part of the individualistic ideal of the 1950s was getting out to the suburbs to be alone with the wife and kids, away from prying relatives. Tight-knit but occasionally suffocating community life typically gave way to a suburban lifestyle where relatives were a safe distance away, and few neighbors became lifelong friends. The nuclear family individualism of the 1950s sowed the seeds of the personal fulfillment individualism of the 1970s, when personal sexual and emotional satisfaction came to be regarded as the main reason for being or staying in a relationship.

Our Misunderstanding of Freedom

If one just grasped the immediate causes of family breakdown, one might think it reasonable to try to return to the 1950s. Besides being impossible, this would be a step backwards. It is not the woman's movement per se that has undermined the strength of family bonds and ties of love and friendship. Enormous gains have been made by many people because of the various liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and many people are leading genuinely better, freer lives than they did in the 1950s. It is now possible to be born different or choose an unorthodox path and not be ashamed of that difference. People now have unprecedented freedom to live as they wish to live. This freedom in itself is a good development that can enhance the human potential for growth, independence, and creative expression. The problem is not in having all these new freedoms. The problem is in how people use and abuse their freedoms.

In the West, we tend to associate freedom with the ability to do as we choose when, where, and with whom we want. There is an alternative conception of freedom that is strong in many non-Western cultures. Whereas the Western notion might be called freedom from constraint, this other notion might be called freedom within constraint. A metaphor may help clarify the difference. Imagine a young girl who loves music and instruments. She tries many, gets to an advanced beginner level on several, but always moves on, in search of the right instrument with which to fully express herself. As a teenager she discovers classical guitar and devotes herself to it. She practices scales
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for relatives to live dualistic ideal of the with the wife sit-knit but occasion-gave way to a suburban, distance away, and the nuclear family in the personal fulfill-personal sexual and as the main reason of family breakdown, return to the 1950s step backwards. It is has undermined the id friendship. Nongroup because of the and 1970s, and many ives than they did in different or choose an at difference. People as they wish to live, nt that can enhance idence, and creative all these new free- and abuse their free-dom with the ability hom we want. There at is strong in many er notion might be tion might be called may help clarify the as music and instruc-ted beginner level on the right instrument teenager she discov-er. She practices scales for hours each day, and internalizes the rules of the guitar. While she has forsaken learning the secrets of many other instruments by choosing the guitar, she can now play the guitar directly from her chest, unhindered by rules and the awkwardness of unfamiliarity. She can improvise and convey her deepest feelings through her music, not in spite of having limited herself to the guitar, but because she has found freedom within its constraints. Her initial period of exploration required a freedom from constraints, but a deeper freedom only emerged once she had made a choice, and devoted herself to that choice.

This can be taken as a metaphor for many of the things we must choose in life. Often we Americans seem paralyzed by our possibilities. How can we devote ourselves to one choice, when this entails the loss of so many other possible lives? On the other hand, how can we allow ourselves not to choose, when not choosing in itself becomes one of our poorest choices? We can try to do and have it all—for example, have several lovers—but this can exact its own price as we spread our energy and devotion too thin. In a sense, many of us seem arrested in adolescence. We dislike choosing because it is felt to entail a loss of freedom. There might always be something better out there, so why commit? Why not keep one foot out the door? The answer is that the deeper freedom comes only after we make choices. Although the guitar and piano are very different, they are not fundamentally so. Each allows the discovery and expression of complex musical forms only after years of devotion. Ultimately the same freedom of expression can be found through either.

The same points could be made for love and commitment to a lover. Of course a lover is not an instrument for one's self-expression. However, a relationship can ideally be a medium of expression, where both lovers' thoughts, emotions, dreams, insecurities, and light and dark sides can be explored and mutually formed and created. Americans have glorified a culture of freedom from constraints at the cost of not fully realizing deeper freedoms that emerge with intimacy, loyalty, trust, devotion, discipline, and commitment. Of course, none of us would want to give up our personal freedoms. The answer lies not in taking away or renouncing personal freedoms, but in learning to use personal freedom more wisely and less selfishly. In learning
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what it means to live well, then, we must reconsider what it means to us to be free.

Our Biology
Perhaps the deepest factor underlying the breakdown in family cohesiveness is our innate psychological make-up. According to evolutionary psychologists, human desires evolved no less than the human body to pass on genes to the next generation. For example, since female sexual infidelity is the single greatest threat to a man passing on his genes, male jealousy should center on his mate’s having sex with other men. Conversely, the greatest threat to female reproductive success is abandonment by her mate. Therefore female jealousy should center on a shift in emotional commitment. Evolutionary psychologists find ample evidence for just such a psychological dimorphism between the sexes. Since men maximize their genetic chances by having offspring with many women, and women maximize the chances of their few offspring by cultivating the devotion of men, male and female reproductive and emotional strategies are doomed to collide.

Social liberation movements have set free certain biological tendencies that were once held in check by familial, religious, and moral pressures. Helen Fischer’s recent book The Anatomy of Love offers a sociobiological analysis of human sexual behavior and desires. She concludes that both men and women evolved to hedge their genetic bets by having children with more than one partner. We may have as strong a biological predisposition to fall out of love as we do to fall in love. It is “natural” under certain circumstances to feel repulsed by a lover, and abandon them or drive them out by becoming repulsive in our behaviors toward them. Although we do not consciously intend to have multiple partners, our innate patterns of desire naturally lead us to get fed up with old mates after several years, and to desire others. In our culture this expresses itself as serial monogamy combined with the clandestine adultery committed by both women and men. In other cultures, there are strong countervailing institutions, mores, and family pressures to keep people from abandoning marriage and children. Ostracism or loss of community standing can be seen as too high a price to pay for the fulfillment of desire. Western cul-
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tures, in undoing traditional limits on personal freedom, have
 gained sexual freedom, but have lost the anchoring stability,
love, and support of a lifelong nuclear or extended family.

Learning from Evolutionary Psychology
Evolutionary psychology (Wright 1994) does not teach that we
are doomed to commit adultery or leave our mates after a few
years. It does, however, teach us that desires in this direction
are natural. It also reveals just how inhospitable the present
social clime is to monogamy. For example, we no longer live
in small tribes where privacy is scarce and reputation essential
for survival; instead we live in giant cities where anonymous
interactions are easy and risks to reputation few.

Men, who are easily aroused by visual images of potential
mates, are inundated with pornographic and sexual imagery,
perhaps making them sour more easily on their less than
supermodel wives. Of course, many men enjoy seeing these
images, but it is not in the best interests of a stable society to
overly fuel male desires for philandering. Families do suffer
when pornography is rampant.

Lifelong monogamy is the exception rather than the rule.
In a cross-cultural analysis, 83 percent of 853 societies were
found to be polygynous, and polygyny is common even where it
is forbidden (Buss 1994: 177). Men especially have polygynous
inclinations. With multiple women, men can have more chil-
dren. Evolutionary psychology suggests that men do not desire
to leave a wife so much as desire to find a new mate (Symons
1979). Our tribal ancestors probably engaged in polygamy rather
than divorce. However, since multiple-partner marriages are
illegal in America, men (and women) are faced with the option
of suppressing polygamous desires, committing adultery, or dis-
and. By legally mandating monogamy, our society may in
fact be encouraging divorce.

Most of us have lived in serial monogamy, whether in our
multiple premarital partners or second and third marriages.
Will the future bring an institutionalization of serial monogamy?
Will people in the near future be signing marriage contracts for,
say, ten years, with commitments to continue paying child sup-
port if they decide not to renew? This may sound improbable,
but it is not so different from prenuptial agreements, which are

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gaining in popularity. A ten-year marriage contract has certain benefits. When the going gets tough in a marriage, people can stick it out for a few years. Many divorces ensue when people can see no hope in waiting till death. Couples in a ten-year marriage might treat each other better, since they won't be able to take each other for granted as easily. If they have been good together, they can easily renew the marriage vow.

The dark side of such a concept, however, is disturbing. What happens to children? What happens to the commitment needed to make a family work? Won't women stand to lose more from such an arrangement, given that it is usually women who sacrifice more of their earning power when the children are young? While I suspect that some variant of short-term marriage or even polygamy may become available eventually, I imagine that most people, being optimists and in love at the time of their wedding, will continue to want to enter marriage with the vow “till death do us part.”

Lastly, evolutionary psychology (Wright 1994) teaches us that great income disparities in a society serve to undermine marriage. A fundamental tenet of evolutionary psychology is that females are attracted to resource-rich and powerful males. The temptations offered by young adoring women may lead a man to leave his aging wife. Similarly, income disparity may lead a woman to leave her less affluent husband. In a society with high income disparity, innate tendencies that mitigate against family stability may become aggravated.

As the insights of evolutionary psychology become more widely known, people may become more aware of the biological roots of their desires and romantic longings. If people are educated before marriage to expect to fall out of love (or in love with other potential mates), they can perhaps deal with such situations more wisely when they do arise after several years of marriage. Men, for example, may be better able to channel their polygynous desires, and women better able to channel their desires for powerful males, if they are aware of the evolutionary reasons they have such desires. In becoming more aware of their biology and innate psychological architecture, men and women may become freer from the dictates of their “selfish genes,” and gain some perspective on the absurdity of the human condition.
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Responses to Changes in the Family

The alienation, loneliness, and instability associated with the breakdown in our families have been a high price to pay for our freedom to do as we please. There have been and will continue to be a reaction against the fragmentation of family and alienation of private life in America. This will take many forms, including a changing role for grandparents, a rediscovery of the value of marriage, changes in the women's movement, a men's movement, new religious perspectives, government responses, and changes in our conceptions of love.

**A Changing Role for Grandparents**

Many of us will find ourselves alone in our old age. Whereas grandparents in traditional societies live with or near their children, and play a daily role in the lives of their grandchildren, many of us will be placed in nursing homes. Others of us will be avoided by the children we ourselves disappointed decades before. Since people need and want connection and love in their lives, there has been and will continue to be a reaction against the dominant materialistic and selfish ethos of our culture. Some grandparents may reject the present ideal of a sunny retirement away from the kids and opt to stay closer to their grandchildren. At the same time, there may be a rediscovery of the value of grandparents in our culture, as working parents seek out help raising children.

**The Rediscovery of the Value of Marriage**

As attitudes change in response to the breakdown in the American family, we can expect that an appreciation of the value of family life and marriage will reemerge, especially among young people. Many young Americans have suffered through their parents' divorce. Their resentments are quite different from those of their parents. They are not as motivated by ideologies. It is not so much "the system," patriarchy, or capitalism that have hurt them, as it is broken homes and dysfunctional parents. The present generation is not apathetic, as people who were young in the 1960s and 1970s tend to believe. Rather, many young people today are putting their energy into creating
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lasting connections and healing old wounds in their own lives and the lives of the people they love. At the same time, some fall into the old traps of anger, escapism, and nihilism. While many people of the present generation may follow their parents' example and divorce, many young people will commit themselves to families and communities, not because they are constrained to do so, but because they want the long-term love and security in their lives that is the reward for such commitment. Since their own upbringings were so unstable and emotionally painful, they may be less willing to walk out on a relationship. If this is true, we can expect divorce rates to fall gradually in the next few decades.

Changes in the Women's Movement
Many within the women's movement have de-emphasized the movement's earlier ideological anger with patriarchy and come to emphasize practical issues relating to motherhood, children, and money, such as day-care, maternity leave, and adequate insurance coverage. Mainstream feminism seems to have taken a less radical turn. Men are seen less as oppressors than as fathers, brothers, sons, coworkers, and friends, whose cooperation is needed to raise healthy children. In general, we can expect to see more and more of social and religious movements that seek to better community, family, and the quality of children's lives. In comparison, ideological movements that focus on individual rights and liberation will probably not regain the popularity they enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s any time soon.

The Men's Movement
In response to the women's movement, and men's feelings of having lost their place, a men's movement has recently emerged. In addition to emphasizing issues relating to men's emotions, this movement stresses practical issues, such as custody and visiting rights for divorcees, and the right to spend time with one's family. Many men are making clear the extent of their frustration and anger over present divorce settlements, which tend to limit the continued role of fathers in children's lives after a divorce, and relegate many men to a source of financial support.
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Whereas in the past many men expressed their anger toward divorce settlements by skipping alimony payments, men have now organized in a more productive effort to change existing divorce settlement and judicial proceedings. While some may see this as a reassertion of patriarchy, it may be a necessary step in the direction of increasing the presence of fathers in children’s lives. If fatherlessness is one of the root causes of America’s various social problems, then a father’s movement is a good thing. Another expression of men’s willingness and desire to change themselves and their relations with women and children was the recent million man march on Washington, D.C. In this remarkable public testament, black men atoned for selfish and harmful behaviors, and swore to devote themselves to community, economic betterment, work, wives, and family.

New Religious Perspectives

New religious perspectives have emerged to address current personal and family problems. There has been a revival within American Christianity in reaction to the perceived excesses and failings of liberal secular culture. The rise of the religious right since the late 1970s is only the most visible expression of this countermovement. Many individuals’ lives have been altered by the Christian movement’s emphasis on traditional values. Many of the men who attend mass Christian revival sessions like those of Promisekeepers probably do stay with their families because of this guidance. Who would have thought in the counterculture years that thousands of young Americans would be taking public vows to remain virgins until marriage? At the same time, many non-Christian religious movements have gained adherents in recent decades. Islam has made enormous gains among young African-Americans and brought discipline, commitment, and meaning to many inner city lives. Eastern religions and New Age perspectives—often inspired by traditional Asian and native American values—have gained many adherents and taught people to think of love and family as a spiritual bond.

Government Responses

In the Summer of 1997, there were two notable governmental...
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responses to recent changes in the American family. Louisiana created a new type of legal marriage in addition to the standard marriage contract. “Covenant marriages” are to be legally binding for life. Divorce under a covenant marriage will require proof of abuse or adultery. Hawaii, on the other hand, passed a law extending all legal benefits of marriage to gay marriages. Louisiana’s conservative response was to “just say no” to divorce and alternative living arrangements. Hawaii’s liberal response was to accept new family paradigms. Will the country follow Louisiana’s lead or Hawaii’s?

Efforts such as Louisiana’s to discourage divorce by making it tougher to divorce are probably going to have minimal impact on divorce rates because a culture of individualism and free choice is so deeply rooted in this country. People who opt for covenant marriages will probably be those least likely to divorce in the first place. Policymakers can advocate a return to traditional values and attempt to legislate change in this direction, but unless people’s values change from within, there will be no change in behavior. Legislation cannot change people’s values directly. It can at best facilitate change indirectly. Nevertheless, if familial stability is our priority, then indirect support of family values is important. For example, if the above arguments from evolutionary psychology are valid, government can and should encourage limitations on access to pornography, and discourage excessive disparities in wealth.

More concretely, politicians perceived as offering aid to families will increasingly gain votes, particularly women’s votes. Voters will push for laws and company practices that address their parenting needs. For example, companies may want to offer child care, pregnancy leave, or flex-time in order to keep good workers who are juggling careers with parenthood. Although children do not themselves vote, policy will probably follow voter demand and become more pro-child than pro-marriage. Tax breaks for dependents and the earned income credit for the working poor will remain popular. Laws mandating insurance coverage for children will become necessary as increasing numbers of children fall below the poverty line. Teaching real life survival skills in school may become essential as families become too varied and sometimes unable to teach these skills consistently. Rather than a course on kitchen skills, home
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economics may become a course on how to pay bills, how to avoid
pregnancy, and how to feed, raise, discipline, and care for chil-
dren.

Changing Conceptions of Love

Fairy tales, Hollywood, pop songs, and fashion ads drew us in
romantic fantasy. We grow up dreaming of the princess or prince
who will transform the drudgery of our ordinary lives into pas-
sonate bliss. We are in love with being in love. Fantasy and
sex sell products, but if we expect life to be like a romantic fan-
tasy advertisement, we are setting ourselves up for disappoint-
ment. Romantic infatuation typically fades within a year or
two. There may even be three independent brain chemical sys-
tems underlying romantic infatuation, intimacy, and commit-
ment behaviors (Fisher 1992), each with its own time course. If
we equate feeling romantically in love with deep love, we will
aturally believe that we have fallen out of love when the pas-
sion and infatuation fade. In other cultures, true love is equated
with family, friendship, devotion, and lifelong connection. Many
languages such as Japanese, actually have different words for
being romantically in love versus deeply loving someone. In
some more traditional cultures where the emphasis is on un-
conditionally loving rather than being passionately in love, the
transition into the love of family may be easier to accept and
even appreciated and cultivated. As we Americans reconstruc-
t our understanding of love in the aftermath of the social revolu-
tions of recent decades, there may be a transformation in our
everyday conceptions of love. Perhaps we are witnessing the
maturation of common notions of love in America, from the ju-
venile equating of love with romantic bliss to a wiser emphasis
on caring, connection, and generosity.

New conceptions of love emerged following the breakdown
of the 1950s’ ideal of breadwinner-homemaker. Some sought to
decouple love from sex. Some couples swapped partners for the
fun of it. Promiscuous sex became all the rage at the 1970s and
1980s club scene. But carefree sex became less popular with
the advent of AIDS, the ongoing censure of churches and fami-
lies, and the realization that lasting happiness was not to be
found in dozens of one night stands. In realizing that they want
real and lasting connection with a partner, many Americans
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have had to reconceive love in the aftermath of the failures and successes of the sexual revolution. It is safe to say that people want to keep the freedoms engendered by the sexual revolution at the same time as create real relationships that go beyond traditional romance and gender roles.

Even though the New Age rubs some people the wrong way because it can seem wishy-washy and at times pseudo-spiritual, the movement's emphasis on physical and spiritual self-development has influenced many people's conceptions of love. The romantic relationship itself becomes a vehicle for mutually enhancing and exploring awareness (see, for example, Levine and Levine 1995). Sexual guilt and aberrations such as sadism and masochism are seen to be spiritual "illnesses" (see, for example, Chang 1977). I suspect that this conception of love will become more popular in America in coming generations, whether or not people actually realize it in their day-to-day lives. It will become an ideal that primarily sees love as connection, generosity, and as spiritual practice, rather than infatuation, romantic bliss, or dependency.

A spiritual conception of love may require strong moral precepts to work in practice. Unsupported, this conception of love could have a dark side, as some people become disillusioned with their partner's potential to become lifelong vehicles for personal, "spiritual" development. Not surprisingly, selfishness and materialism can express themselves in apparently spiritual ways. It may become easier for a husband to leave his wife if he justifies it to himself as having found a "soulmate" in his secretary, than if he has to think about his actions in terms of betrayal, adultery, or sin.

On the whole, however, I believe that the slowly emerging ideal of love and sex as spiritual work and play is a more mature approach to love and relationships than traditional rigid gender roles and obsessions with romance. Although Americans will continue to romanticize love, I suspect that as the notion of love as connection grows in our culture, family ties will strengthen over time, as will other types of relationship.
Some Personal Reflections on Love

I spent almost two years living in a remote Nepali village with the U.S. Peace Corps. Arranged marriages there were, on average, no less happy than marriages I see in America. Couples had distinct roles and very different expectations of each other and marriage. They needed each other in order to survive, and family and duty were given emphasis over personal, sexual, or emotional fulfillment. I doubt whether people talked about their feelings for each other in great depth, since emotional connection was not the primary motivation for marriage. Caring was expressed by fulfilling duty well. This is not to say that people did not feel romantically for each other or that they did not have intimate love. Emotional connections were not abstracted from concrete aspects of marriage: cleaning, feeding, working the fields. What struck me most was that marriage for Nepalis was closely tied to faith. The communion was seen as sacred because duty was sacred to them, and love was duty was God. While we Americans may find such conceptions alien—indeed, we tend to find service demeaning—I think that we are witnessing a gradual rediscovery of certain parallel notions in our own culture. While the devout have always emphasized the religious aspects of marriage, even atheists now speak of the need for faith, work, and compromise in marriage. The view that love is a connection or resonance between characters or souls seems to be displacing earlier notions that love is an emotion, or a sexual bond, or romance. While love is many things, I find the return to a spiritual understanding of love reason for hope.

My father is from China. He has always felt uncomfortable saying “I love you,” and I think I understand why. It is not just a stereotypical Asian stoicism. Just as saying “I trust you” could be taken to imply that there is some reason not to trust, saying “I love you” seems to be an assertion of the obvious, and thereby calls into question. Whereas it used to bother me that my father did not express his love as an American father would, I now realize that he saw verbal expressions of love as a combination of the embarrassingly romantic, the confessional, and the vulgar. Real love is expressed in action, commitment, or helping out; words, he thought unnecessary.
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Perhaps he is right. Perhaps we Americans say “I love you” so often because we need to strengthen verbally what is in fact in doubt. Is there genuine love when 40 percent of children witness the breakup of their home, and perhaps 15 percent witness divorce twice (Cherlin 1992: 137)? Don’t we often say “I love you” in order to hear these same words and feel reassured?

I am American, so I feel more at ease with talking about feelings than my father, and certainly I enjoy expressing love verbally when I feel it. But I am also skeptical when I hear words, my own included. I wait to see the actions that reveal character, intent, sincerity, and emotion. I am struck by how often people say things they do not really mean. Usually this is not because they intend to deceive, but because they say things so automatically.

I am disturbed by how love is portrayed in the media and talked about on talk shows. Since Freud opened our unconscious to analysis, love has been scientifically analyzed, deconstructed, and simplified into a complex of instincts, urges, and delusions. There is a cottage industry of pop therapists catering to the market of people eager to understand their suffering in romance and relationships. For just $29.95 a man offers to teach us that women are from Venus, while women give women 1950s-style rules on how to catch and hold onto a man. This tendency to simplify and rationalize our emotional life has made some bedroom conversations sound like Woody Allen dialogues. Rather than flow with our feelings, passions, and intuitions, and rather than speak honestly from the heart, we periodically attempt to step outside the relationship to analyze “the relationship.” But when we dissect a living relationship with our rational minds, the relationship can itself become more rational than emotional. This is not to say that there is no good in being aware of what is going on in a relationship, but awareness is not the same as analysis. Perhaps it is my skepticism of words, but when one is aware of a problem, it is usually more important to do something (apologize, listen, touch, hug, forgive) than it is to talk about the problem from an “objective” point of view.

During the many years I lived in Japan I observed a very different attitude towards infidelity. Infidelity is an ancient problem for both men and women, and probably occurs in all
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societies because of the innate architecture of human desires. The Japanese tolerate a degree of infidelity within marriage so long as affairs are handled with utmost discretion and families are not broken. Whereas infidelity tends to be viewed as a sin by many Americans, Japanese tend to view infidelity as weakness or lack of self-restraint. The pain associated with rejection and deception is no doubt similar, but a Japanese woman would probably react quite differently to a cheating husband than would an American woman. Whereas an American might threaten divorce right away, a more traditional Japanese woman might take a longer-term view, and not risk losing a father for her children and a partner for her old age. The loss of face and stigmatization associated with divorce are still quite high in Japan. She might confront her husband or his mistress, or she might make it impossible for him to get away with his misbehavior by watching his every move, but divorce would tend to be regarded as a threat of last resort.

Our high divorce rate, then, may in part reflect a culture that emphasizes short-term over long-term gratification. Indeed, our culture’s traditional expectations of total sexual fidelity in marriage until death, where desires for other mates are given no permissible avenue of release in a culture that offers constant temptation, can create pressures that serve to undermine marriage. Japanese tolerance of discrete infidelity is tacitly understood to be a safety valve that can release the tensions that can destroy a marriage.

I know a married European woman who fell deeply in love with another man when in her 40s. Her children were grown, and her husband seemed more devoted to his job than to her. She was tormented about leaving her family as much as she was tormented about not being with this other man. After two years of suffering that nearly led to her divorce from her husband, she made a conscious decision: she decided not to leave the family and the history she had created with her husband and children. All other decisions followed from this. She decided to work on her relationship with her husband in order to recreate it. She let the other man go. That was over ten years ago. Now she says she loves her husband, and they seem at peace with each other and themselves. I cannot say whether she made the right decision, but I admire her will and humor.
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about it all. She has shown me that love is something actively created and worked on as much as it is a spontaneous feeling. She said something memorable to me once: “When I got married, I was so in love. But I also knew it was an utter leap of faith. I had no idea what would happen in the future, how we would change, what hard times we would face. This thing was really tough on both of us, but we got through it. We worked like hell because, in the end, family was what both of us wanted.”

This woman taught me that part of what it means to be civilized is to be restrained, not from without, but from within. A civilized person chooses to express, act upon, or enhance certain desires and not others. It is inevitable in the course of a marriage that a man or woman will at times be attracted to or fall in love with another person. It is natural to want to leave when the going gets tough. But humans are motivated by more than desire. We have reason and we have will. We also have an awareness of the consequences of our actions and an awareness of the long-term future. There are times when it takes an act of reason or effortful will not to do something one desires. Unfortunately, everything in popular culture seems to encourage us to “just do it,” regardless of the consequences.

The essence of being a civilized person is not only restraint, it is also civility and tolerance. But civilized tolerance is not the same as tolerating anything. A civilized person tolerates other ways of living when they are in accordance with the core values of civilized life: love, honesty, respect, effort, education, family, community, spirituality, responsibility. For example, you may not be a Hindu, but you can see that Hinduism is a deep path to a spiritual life. You may not be gay, but you can accept that a gay couple can be as loving as a heterosexual couple. What should not be tolerated by a civilized person is that which undermines the core values that sustain civilization: hate, corruption, criminality, incivility, intolerance, and indifference to children and to life.

We Americans tend to argue about what divides us. And no doubt, there are some very difficult ethical problems we must address, such as abortion or America’s extremes of rich and poor. However, most Americans agree on certain values. These are by definition our core American values. The debate about values is all too often hijacked to forward one narrow political
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agenda or another. In fact, our core family values are held across the political spectrum. We can agree on our core family values while disagreeing on how best to live in accordance with those core values.

Often we argue so much about issues of personal choice and rights that we fail to notice that our core values are deteriorating. It is like fighting over the deed to the house while termites are eating away at the foundation. America needs to get its house in order by focusing public debate on core values, and actively trying to strengthen them. In this regard education is the key. Ethical training must become an integral part of schooling, especially now that many families have become too weak to civilize our children. And they are our children.

A civilization lives and dies by civilizing its children. We all have a stake in how children are raised because uncivilized values express themselves in crime and corrupt behavior, and because selfish or nihilistic or hateful values spread. Thus, first-graders might learn why it is wrong to take someone else's blocks without asking. Junior high-school students might learn about the consequences of getting pregnant out of wedlock. College students might debate difficult moral issues involving conflicting core values such as abortion, once basic core values are in place.

When civility and personal restraint and tolerance decline, can a civilization last? All things end, and America will also eventually end. But will American civilization last for thousands of years, like Chinese civilization, or will it descend into chaos after a few hundred years, like the Roman Empire? Confucius said that if society is a wall, then families are the bricks of that wall; if the bricks start to crumble, then so will the wall. While it seems that American families have been crumbling very rapidly, they have also been reconstructing themselves. We Americans are good at recreating ourselves and recreating institutions to suit our needs. We are not bound by tradition. We will create new notions of family and love in coming decades, but disintegrative trends and moral decay have great momentum in our culture, and can only be damped down with wisdom and effort.

There may be a rediscovery of the value of family and community life in coming decades, especially by young people who
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have suffered through the divorce, experimentation, and selfish seeking of their parents' generation. The young generation may well become both more traditional in realizing the importance of our civilization's core values at the same time they become more tolerant than previous generations in accepting that there are many ways of being in this world. However, the disintegrative trends described in this essay are powerful. We cannot wait for people to realize what America's core values are. We have to cultivate this knowledge institutionally, in schools and in the media. A public debate is now necessary across the political spectrum on what constitutes the basic values of our civilization. Unless there is a rediscovery of core values rooted in a sense of duty to family and personal honor, we will probably go the way of the Romans. We will sack ourselves after a long, affluent decline into moral softness and eventually into barbarism.

References


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