

THE MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES OF DECENCY:
FAMILY AND SOCIETY IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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THE MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES OF DEGENCY:
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Good evening. It is a rare pleasure for a historian to have the opportunity to help launch a major conference on the family in modern America. To Christine Mirsky, James Carmichael, and Fred Weston, I want to extend sincere thanks for the invitation; also, thanks to our distinguished panelists for taking time from their busy schedules to respond to my comments. The only other time I have had the pleasure to visit the state of Georgia was in 1969, while I completed my basic training at Fort Gordon in Augusta. It is good to return to enjoy your hospitality in more agreeable surroundings.

As a teacher I was often surprised to learn how many people believe that the study of history is free of bias, that somehow historians stand above the din of public debate and distill from the past objective wisdom on issues of the present moment. But that is certainly not my position. While I am not as pessimistic as the literary historian Van Wyck Brooks, who wrote that "once you have a point of view all history will back you up,"¹ I do believe that history is the imaginative reconstruction of the past, not merely a chronology of facts upon which all men and women of good faith can agree. I trust that our distinguished panelists will be quick to question whenever my imagination appears to stray noticeably from the facts as you know them or from plain common sense.

My prime objective this evening is to set a mood, to establish a tone for future conference sessions on the American family as we move toward the 21st century. Three principal themes will wend their way in and out of my comments, although there is insufficient time to develop each theme systematically or to illustrate them in necessary historical detail. But they constitute my principal message, and I hope they will receive some attention in upcoming conference sessions.

First, I call attention to the extraordinary complexity of understanding how families perform educational and socializing functions, and the dangers of using simplistic cause and effect models to predict or explain the outcomes of family nurture.

Second, I stress that the real story of the American family is one of evolution and adaptation to massive changes in our social, economic, religious, and cultural life; moreover, that historical knowledge of the family is in a process of dramatic change, sometimes in directions that confirm common sense, other times in directions that truly startle and upset truths we long thought settled.

Third, I contend--mainly by indirection--that we as a society need to be more tolerant and supportive of variations in family structure, work patterns, and values, not only in our laws and policies but in our personal sympathies. As we approach the 21st century, a therapeutic model that stigmatizes all but one type of family as inherently deficient and even pathological no longer is serviceable. In family life as in other cherished institutions, there are multiple possibilities of decency--a self-evident truth, I believe, but one

that rarely guides the formulation of attitudes and policies that affect the family.

My talk tonight will be decidedly on the upbeat, if only to counter the gloom that usually envelops debate on this subject. As one scholar who has mastered most of the relevant literature notes, commentary on the family tends to be "overly solemn and grim" and to ignore "the fun and exhilaration that can occur even in difficult circumstances."² Nonetheless, my aim is not to offer a Pollyannish view of family life in either past or present, nor to divert attention from the social, economic, and technological forces which complicate the lives of modern American families in ways never before experienced. Yet my reading of the past leads me to conclude that the family, in all its diversity, remains a strong and cherished institution in American society--sadly imperfect in many ways, to be sure, and badly requiring more conscious forethought by policymakers in the public and private sectors, but nonetheless the institution in which Americans of every social, ethnic, and racial background believe more strongly than any other. So long as we do not allow fear of change, or nostalgia about the days when father allegedly knew best, to becloud our vision, I see good reason to be prudently optimistic about the future of the family as we approach the 21st century.

To set a mood it is often best to tell a story, in this instance a story that highlights basic common sense that is too often forgotten in public discussion of the family. The story is that of a New England family I have come to know fairly well, and while their family history,

like yours and mine, is infinitely more complex than any outsider can hope to fathom, the basic outlines are instructive.

The story begins with John Savage, of Irish and Scotch descent, born in 1842 and reared on a small farm in the northernmost reaches of Maine. Like several of his brothers in their typically large family, John fulfilled his parents' dream by becoming a preacher in the Methodist faith. As a struggling itinerant minister in upper New York State, John met and fell in love with fourteen-year-old Emma Morrison, whom he married three years later. During the next ten years or so the Savages upheld the spartan life expected of a Methodist preacher's family. Of necessity Emma became expert at keeping up domestic appearances with whatever goods, furnishings, foods and so forth the congregants saw fit to provide for their survival.

In his late thirties, for reasons we need not explore, John Savage became dissatisfied with Methodist doctrine and decided to become a Unitarian. After two years at theological seminary, he began a new ministerial career first on charming Nantucket Island, then in Northern Maine, and finally in Medfield, Massachusetts, some thirty miles southwest of Boston. The Savages stayed in Medfield fifteen years until illness forced John into retirement. They then moved to Plainfield, New Jersey to live with their eldest daughter and her family. Throughout her husband's several changes of heart, mind, and location, Emma Savage followed him steadfastly and unquestioningly, absorbing herself in domestic duties which included prime responsibility for rearing the couple's three daughters, Grace, Marion, and Clara.

John Savage was a man of the book, and tried to instill in his daughters his passion for learning. To a remarkable degree he was successful. At a time when it was hardly common, all of his daughters finished high school, and two attended and graduated from prestigious Smith College. Yet what stands out in retrospect about the daughters was how differently each chose to live her life, and how unlike the others each was in personality and intellectual bent.

The eldest daughter, Grace, tried her hand at teaching grade school but did not like it. When she married a young newspaperman, Charles Selden, to whom she had been secretly engaged since the age of 10, Grace gladly gave up paid employment forever and settled into a life of comfortable domesticity modelled faithfully on her mother's example.

The middle daughter, Marion, was the family genius and also, to everyone's chagrin, flighty and impractical, wholly unlike her pragmatic, down-to-earth sisters and mother. Marion adored school, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Smith College, and then worked at various jobs in publishing until she married an engineer at the unusually advanced age of 34. Tragically, Marion's husband died soon after their first child was born from an illness he contracted during World War I. Though she had only a small soldier's pension to live on, Marion ignored her family's entreaties to return to work. Instead she moved to San Diego, California, where living expenses were minimal and she could sustain herself and her daughter in genteel poverty. Though Marion communicated regularly with her family by mail, she saw them only two or three times for the rest of her life.

The youngest Savage daughter, Clara, was radically different from both of her sisters and from her mother. Like Marion, Clara attended Smith College but managed grades barely high enough to graduate. Clara, however, excelled at extracurricular activities in journalism, for which she prepared herself as a career. Her interest in journalism had begun when she moved with her family to Grace's home in New Jersey upon her father's retirement. There she came under the spellbinding influence of Grace's husband Charles, the news-paperman, whose sparkling dinnertime conversation convinced her of how exciting it would be to report on historic events at home and abroad. After college Clara became one of the nation's first newspaperwomen, and lived busily and independently in New York City, Washington, D. C., and Paris.

After seven years on the job, Clara decided to marry. As her sisters had done, she gave up her career, moved to the suburbs, and had her first child. But an exclusively domestic role soon proved tiresome to Clara. She therefore accepted a fulltime position as editor of a major new periodical in New York City, to which she commuted daily by train and which she held for the rest of her life (except for a six-month leave of absence to give birth to and nurse her second child). Now combining career and motherhood in the early 20th century, I can assure you, went strongly against the grain of public opinion. Clara would have been the first to admit that domestic anxieties stemming from her career commitment were a major factor behind her eventual divorce. But Clara had no regrets about her unconventional lifestyle. As Clara explained to her daughter--whose

friends poked fun because their mothers were always home when they returned from school--she simply could not imagine being happy in any other way.

Obviously no one will remember the Savage family as we remember the Roosevelt's in New York, or the Breckinridge's in Kentucky. Yet the Savages are of interest because they exemplify what each of us knows at a gut level, namely, that while families may set boundaries and a framework for their children's development, the ultimate results of family nurture remain largely unpredictable. That Emma Savage, who married at age seventeen, enjoyed minimal educational opportunities, and aspired only to be a perfect homemaker, mother, and helpmeet to her husband, should have not one but two daughters who graduated college, one of whom became a pioneering married career woman, seems remarkable in retrospect. But these outcomes were no more predictable than the fact that each daughter differed so much in temperament, intellect, level of aspiration, and ultimate life course. And while the diversity is intriguing, I doubt that many of you are truly surprised by it. The story of the Savage family confirms what we know commonsensically about the importance of individual differences among siblings that no mode of family nurture, however elaborately planned or consistently followed, can fundamentally alter.

Consider another aspect of the Savage family's evolution which scholars today are apt to examine under the rubric, "family life cycle." By this they simply mean that the composition and goals of families shift over time; or, stated another way, family life is in fairly steady flux. Who can doubt that when John Savage gave up Methodism

for Unitarianism, for example, a subtle change occurred in the tone of daily life--a change that Grace (who came of age while her father was a strict Methodist) captured in recalling that she never overcame guilt whenever she played cards or other frivolous games, whereas her younger sisters reveled in such earthly distractions, and with their parents' blessing.

We have already noted another change in the "life cycle" of the Savage family with more profound implications. When John, Emma, and Clara--the only daughter still living at home--moved in with Grace and Charles, the result was nothing less than the genesis of Clara's lifelong career in journalism. Might Clara have discovered the satisfactions of journalism without Charles's guidance and inspiration? Of course she might have, but serendipity, in this case her father's unexpected early retirement, assured that talents that could otherwise have lain dormant were fully developed.

These complexities suggest the need for extreme caution before we dare to generalize on the degree to which families shape their children's futures. Unfortunately caution has not often marked discussion of the family, whether in the past or the present. Lawrence Cremin's criticisms along these lines are particularly insightful. While aimed at historians, his comments apply equally well to most scholars and popular writers who, Cremin believes, "have often erroneously assumed that what is intended by parents when they teach or nurture is what they actually end up doing and that what they end up doing is ultimately effective. Moreover, they frequently assume that only one thing at a time is being taught, which leaves them egregiously insensitive to cross-pressures within the family.

And they then compound this error by further assuming that the household sets the boundaries of the educational situation, which leaves them equally insensitive to cross-pressures from without. Like any educational institution, the family originates some educative efforts, mediates others, and actually insulates its members from still others And as with all educational institutions, these efforts within the family are fraught with the uncertainties, contradictions, and ironies that inevitably mark any effort to teach anyone anything."³

Despite the problems Cremin rightly notes, historians during the past decade have made impressive discoveries concerning families in the past which inevitably shed new light on families today. In at least two areas--the history of extended families and of black families under slavery--our knowledge has been thoroughly revolutionized. Let me comment very briefly on both subjects.

It has long been assumed that extended families--parents, children, and assorted relatives living together in a single household--were the typical family arrangement everywhere in the Western world prior to the 19th century Industrial Revolution. Afterward, the argument goes, the mobile, modern-day nuclear family--more suitable to an increasingly urban way of life and a capitalist industrial economy--became the norm. A funny, unexpected development occurred about ten years ago, however, when researchers in Europe and the United States decided to investigate extended families in the past: they could not find many, indeed almost none among the mass of the population. Except for the very rich, historians were forced to conclude that nuclear family arrangements

of the kind we are accustomed to today were the norm in the past as well. Families were certainly larger than they are today, but they were overwhelmingly nuclear in structure. Thus parents and children throughout modern European and American history have lived overwhelmingly in separate households without grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts, etc. The extended family of the past is almost entirely a myth, a product of false memory.⁴

Our knowledge of black family life in the past has been equally revolutionized by recent research, especially concerning the slave experience. Not surprisingly, this research has been controversial. It arose in part as a response by black and white scholars to the famous Moynihan Report of the mid-1960s, which traced distinctive and, in Moynihan's view, pathological features of black family life today to the horrors of slavery. Whatever the faults of the Moynihan Report, it must be granted that it utilized the available historical knowledge at the time, which assumed that slavery had undermined black family life, and hence, there were no family traditions upon which blacks could build after the Civil War.

These assumptions have proved to be totally false. Historians did not know about the black family under slavery because they did not bother to look. Not only did a bewildering variety of black family traditions survive the journey from Africa to the United States, but on the great majority of plantations slave families thrived, providing children and adults with the emotional and intellectual resources necessary to retain their autonomy and to preserve treasured portions of their African culture. Some of the most poignant historical material I have encountered derives from the pioneering research of

scholars like Herbert Gutman, John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Thomas Webber, and Nathan Huggins on this subject.⁵ Unfortunately, we do not know very much about the history of black families during the past 120 years after slavery to speak confidently about its evolution. That black family life today is distinctive in a variety of significant ways, few would deny.⁶ But we dare no longer assume that blacks have no tradition of strong family commitments upon which to build.

If historians occasionally revolutionize views of the past, they more often try, less dramatically, to place our present situation in perspective. Let me offer three different historical vantage points on the family that I hope will spark your interest. I will first briefly contrast the role of the family in society today with its role in the colonial period--the 17th and 18th centuries. Then I will provide a somewhat unusual perspective on the view that we are now experiencing an unprecedented family "crisis." Finally I will examine very selectively a number of demographic indicators which provide evidence of stability as well as change in modern family life.

In colonial America the family was the basic unit of social organization to an extent hard to imagine today--"a little commonwealth," it was called, to emphasize its centrality as an agency of intellectual, moral, religious, and occupational training. The functions of families naturally varied from place to place. In the dispersed farmsteads of up-country South Carolina, for example, families were isolated from one another and from the outside world; whereas in the towns and villages

of Massachusetts, regular contact with other families and occasionally with London was an expectation of daily life. Yet families everywhere in the colonies shared one common characteristic: they shouldered more responsibility for preparing their children for entry into society than their counterparts in England. The reason was simple. Schools and churches were much less plentiful to share the tasks of rudimentary education here than in England; guilds were also less well established to assume a major role in training male children for productive employment. Hence for some 150 years the family in the colonies took upon itself responsibilities it shared more evenly with other institutions abroad. For the vast majority of the population, the family was indeed the school of life.⁷

How far we have traveled from a view of the family as "a little commonwealth," I do not have to tell you. Indeed if one is to believe several prominent commentators on the state of the American family, notably Kenneth Keniston in All Our Children and Christopher Lasch in Haven in a Heartless World, the family no longer has any autonomy at all. The outside world has overwhelmed it, so-called "experts" in education, social work, and medicine have taken over its prime functions, and it is entirely subservient to the mass media, they declare. At best, the family today can serve only as a "broker," negotiating with professionals, with big business, and with government agencies to make certain that they occasionally take children's and parents' needs into account.⁸

Tonight is not the occasion for systematic criticism of recent scholarly writing on the family. Let it suffice to say that I do not

find the arguments of Lasch and Keniston very impressive because they vastly underrate the powerful influence which parental teaching and family values continue to exert on children. Families may indeed require in the future a more self-consciously pro-family policy from government and big business. But to imply that the family has already died as a significant educational and socializing institution is to miss an opportunity to build constructively upon a strong emotional commitment to the family that persists among every ethnic and racial group, and in every social class, in American society. Families may no longer be "little commonwealths"--in law, in theory, or in reality--but they do remain society's single most powerful agents of child nurture. Their responsibilities are very different from those of 300 years ago, as well they should be. But change is not necessarily decay. If the family does not serve, in Lasch's evocative term, as a "haven in a heartless world," it serves other functions as important for survival today as those the "little commonwealth" served for the colonists three centuries ago.

I turn now to another area in which comparisons between families past and present are frequently drawn, viz the view that the family is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of morale. The family-in-crisis motif pervades both scholarly and popular writing on the subject. If the family is disintegrating as rapidly as many commentators think, then the current spate of jeremiads may indeed be in order, and woe be to nay-sayers like myself. But I remain skeptical. As a historian of our educational and juvenile justice systems, I recognize a familiar ring in much of this discussion, and feel a sense of déjà vu,

of redundancy. Now, I know that there are many who regard any attempt to downplay a sense of crisis in the family today as somehow ethically bankrupt and socially irresponsible. But this misses the point: if there are powerful continuities in our perception of family crises, these continuities inevitably cast a different light on our present predicament, and should not be ignored or interpreted as evidence of callousness or blindness to harsh reality.

It would take a speech of several hours duration to develop my thoughts on this subject adequately. At risk of considerable oversimplification, let me present my conclusions succinctly and bold-face. Basically, I see little novelty in today's perceptions of family crisis, either in tone or in content. Counterparts to today's forebodings have appeared again and again during the course of the 20th century; moreover, dire statistics have always been available to "prove" the case. In fact, I can think of no decade in this century when, to experts and popular writers alike, the family did not appear either on the verge of collapse (the pessimists) or of radical readjustment (the optimists). The vast majority of commentators on the family have always seen its Armageddon just around the historical corner.

Certainly this was the case in pre-World War I America, when the nation's leading social reformers bewailed the demise of traditional family life and created numerous new social institutions--juvenile courts, social workers, visiting teachers, compulsory education laws, mothers' pensions (now AFDC, or welfare), for instance--to cope with the changes. Certainly this was true of the 1920s, when moral disintegration and the triumph of a hedonistic culture, led by self-satisfied

parents and self-indulgent children, seemed imminent (recall Nancy Milford's Zelda). Certainly this was true of the 1930s, when economic deterioration jeopardized family financial foundations as never before, and when widespread joblessness attenuated traditional definitions of sex roles and severely weakened the authority of fathers in the home. Certainly this was true of the 1940s, when families were shaken by war-time separations and postwar adjustments, and when the plague of juvenile delinquency struck many commentators as a new blot on the American landscape, symbolic testimony to and literal retribution for the decline of parental, especially paternal, authority. Certainly this was true of the 1950s--if only we could cast aside the haze of nostalgia about the period now befogging our memories--when gang delinquency reached all-time prominence among lower-class youth, and when the peer group usurped primary socialization functions (or so it was commonly alleged) from the moribund middle-class family. And certainly--how can we forget!--this was true of the 1960s, when it became fair sport to blame the family for producing rudderless, nihilistic youth seeking only the latest high.

If there is a family crisis, in short, it appears to be perennial. The content changes, to be sure, but the sense that we are undergoing a family crisis is a commonplace of 20th century American experience. This perspective may serve to allay somewhat our current anxieties and fears that the family is about to collapse, die, and disappear from the social landscape before we even reach the 21st century.

Let me offer an additional and perhaps equally idiosyncratic observation along these lines; I shall be interested to know whether you agree or disagree. However gloomy much of today's commentary on

the family is, it appears to me that, overall, we are actually more optimistic about the family's survival, and more respectful of the irreplaceable virtues of family life, than we were ten or fifteen years ago. I recall very clearly that when I was in graduate school in the early 1970s, the "in" writing on the family was typified by R. D. Laing's Politics of the Family, and David Cooper's Death of the Family. These books saw in families only one or another form of perverse human relationship, and traced to family nurture every conceivable ill in individuals and in society. The nuclear family was on its way down, these writers believed, and good riddance.⁹

Today, however--in the media and in the halls of academe--the positive qualities of family life are gaining a much more kindly hearing than they were a decade ago. Lasch's Haven in a Heartless World is a case in point. As history I find it sadly lacking, but it reveals that even for people on the far left of the political spectrum, family values no longer seem old-fashioned and anachronistic. If the family is dying--and clearly I don't think it is--at least there are fewer scholars and popular writers saluting its demise, and rejecting out of hand the unique sets of experiences and sensibilities which it best seems capable to nurture.

I turn now first to the issue of family resiliency, and then to a review of statistical evidence on the incidence of marital disruption, especially divorce, in American history. In an earlier period a subject like this would have been discussed entirely in moral rather than statistical terms. But make no mistake about it: statistical analysis of the family has frequently concealed implicit moral and political

judgments. We must remember that statistics, no matter how balefully presented in the raw, never speak for themselves but only through interpreters.

Let me make a number of points about statistics that we see frequently cited today as self-evident truths bearing witness to the decline of the American family. First, it is in actuality remarkably difficult to determine the point at which fluctuations in long-term processes of social change merit the adjective "radical"; whether demographic indicators can ever be used to explain psychological distress in real-life parents and children; whether people themselves actually perceive "social change" as bearing directly on them and inducing "crisis" in their family lives; and whether, perhaps, initial sharp breaks from social norms, even if seemingly "small" in retrospect, better warrant descriptions as "crisis situations" than later increases in magnitude of the same phenomenon (I am thinking, for example, of the large relative increase in the proportion of women entering the work force in the early 20th century, which was widely cited then--in terms that would make us blush for their naivete--as portending moral and social chaos).

These analytical problems have always intrigued me, but I recall becoming particularly attentive to them a few years ago after reading a book which many of you have probably read too, Alvin Toffler's Future Shock. In the Introduction to the book, Toffler appears to show considerable awareness of how difficult it is to compare, qualitatively, the impact of social change on human beings from one generation to the next. But then, throwing caution to the wind, he spends the next 500

pages doing just that, assuming that everyone can agree on the "critical point" at which people no longer adapt to change but are merely numbed by it.¹⁰

But how much change can people, and particularly families, adapt to without losing their bearings? Quite a bit, I believe, more than we generally give them credit for. Rather than list historical example after example, however, let me simply bring to your attention a characteristically idiosyncratic but profound insight on this subject by the late, great anthropologist, Margaret Mead. Every generation, said Mead, tends to fear social change and to exaggerate the fragility of its basic social institutions. In fact, she contended, compared to the generation of her own grandmother, we today are experiencing less disruptive changes in our lives. "For the last hundred years," Mead wrote, "it is the grandparents who have seen more change than any generation in the history of the world. When my grandmother died in 1928 at the age of eighty-two, she had seen the whole development of the horseless carriage, the flying machine, the telegraph and Atlantic cables, telephone, radio, silent films. In my lifetime, I have lived through driving a horse and buggy, making butter, going to bed with a kerosene lamp, the appearance and disappearance of the great airships. . . . Grandparents--and great grandparents--have now become the living repositories of change, living evidence that human beings can adjust, can take in the enormous changes which separate the pre-1945 generation from those who were reared after the war. . . . Today's parents of young children were born into the world of TV, computers, space exploration, the bomb, and they have seen much less change than their parents and their grandparents."¹¹

And as if she had not already gone enough against the grain of popular opinion, Mead concluded that we may today be worse off as individuals in our capacity to grow by not having to adapt to as pronounced social change as generations in the recent past. In sum, we dare not merely observe new uncertainties and pressures on families today, and then jump illogically and fatalistically to the conclusion that families can no longer adapt, that unless we return to the status quo ante, families as we know them cannot possibly survive.

But to say that the family is a resilient and adaptive institution does not mean, of course, that it can persist without change. And if there is one area where pronounced change is surely occurring today, it is in the rate of marital disruption, especially by divorce, which has reached approximately one out of three marriages. I hardly need to tell you that divorce data are widely cited today to demonstrate a sharp decline in the quality of family life, especially among the middle classes, a growing frivolousness in marital and sexual loyalties, and a casual indifference among young adults to the developmental needs of children. That the divorce rate has skyrocketed in recent years no one would deny (although, it should be noted, many marital separations in the past simply went unrecorded because of the difficulty of obtaining a divorce). I would also agree with those who claim that nowadays the decision to divorce rests primarily on what is best for adults, not necessarily what is best for children (although I would modify this by saying that in many instances divorce may be better for children than suffering through the daily acrimony of an embittered adult relationship, and that children frequently prove more resilient in adapting

to the unpleasant realities of their parents' personal lives than we anticipate). But truly to assess the meaning of marital disruption in modern America, I think it is essential to place current trends and concerns in perspective, for the history does produce some surprises.

Most surprising, perhaps, is that we are not the first generation of Americans to become despondent over rising divorce rates. Divorce first received serious attention from agencies of the federal government in the 1880s. By the 1890s government statisticians were alarmed to note that divorce was growing at a rate almost three times that of the increase in population. In the early 1900s a major nationwide debate ensued on the implications of the accelerating divorce rate. Cities large and small saw the formation of anti-divorce leagues, which predicted that the family was doomed unless something were done to roll back divorce rates. Young people, they claimed, would have little incentive to marry or bear children if divorce were so likely an outcome.

The efforts of the anti-divorce leagues notwithstanding, divorce rates increased even faster in those years. By 1920 the rate was double that of 1900, which, in turn, was about double that of 1890, and so on. Of course, the ratio of divorces to marriage was lower then than today. But relative to the prior stability of the institution of marriage, the shock was every bit as disconcerting as that we have experienced in the last twenty years.¹²

Without minimizing the significance of today's divorce rates, I do not think it fair to conclude from them that we have entirely lost faith in marriage as an institution. The sociologist Mary Jo Bane has made the strongest case yet, I believe, for this viewpoint.

"We are...a long way from a society in which marriage is rejected or replaced by a series of short-term liaisons," Bane contends.¹³ She bases her judgment on a variety of statistical indicators which reveal, first (and obviously), that most marriages are long-lived and do not end in divorce; second, that the vast majority of divorced people continue to believe strongly in the institution of marriage and remarry within five years of divorce; and third, that precious few people in our society marry more than twice. In addition, Bane demonstrates that a larger portion of people today than ever before in our history are choosing to marry. In other words, in the 19th and 20th centuries, it was much more common for men and women to remain unmarried for a lifetime than it is today. Of those who do marry, moreover, there is less childlessness than ever before, i.e. fewer families which do not produce any children (even though, at the same time, the number of children per family has been declining steadily since the early 1800s).

But perhaps the most interesting historical data on this subject concern the extent of marital disruption, for any reason, in the past as compared to today. Without delving into the statistical complexities, it is clear that until very recently, a substantial fall in death rates more than offset the effects on children of rising divorce rates. In other words, in the late 19th century it was just as common for a child to lose a parent to death as it has been of late for a child to lose the continuous care of a parent due to divorce. This may appear to be small consolation but it is a key historical fact: it compels us to recognize that marital disruption--which is another way of saying the single-parent family--has long been an ever-present

reality in the lives of American children. You may be interested to know, furthermore, that of those children affected by marital disruption, a much higher proportion today continue to live with one or the other natural parent than was true in the past. Fifty years ago the death of a parent or divorce was much more likely to result in the child being sent to live with relatives, with foster families, or to an institution. But today, despite the rising divorce rates, the proportion of children living with at least one natural parent has steadily risen to a rate of ninety-five percent.

I conclude now with several brief observations on what I termed earlier "the multiple possibilities of decency" in American family life--the theme on which I had planned originally to focus my talk this evening. On reconsideration, however, I decided to deal with it mainly in conclusion, for I feel too strongly on the subject to be appropriately dispassionate for very long. My views undoubtedly derive in part from my own upbringing, as well as from my professional endeavors as a historian, particularly my recent work on the evolution of government and privately-sponsored programs in parent education.¹⁴

In this research I have been surprised to find that around the turn of the 20th century, experts who offered parents childrearing advice were considerably less didactic than the great majority of experts today. Scientific research on children was already well developed by the early 1900s. Nonetheless, the sponsors of programs in parent education--notably the United States Children's Bureau and the National PTA--were neither dependent on nor subservient to the dictates of science. Instead, they continued to hold in equally high regard a variety of religiously- and

culturally-based traditions of child rearing. Moreover, the definition of parent education in the early 20th century was much broader than I had expected. It included not only teaching parents the "do's" and "don'ts" of child care, but also what we today would term child advocacy. Both the Children's Bureau and the PTA stressed the education of parents--especially mothers--in social and political affairs. Political education and political action on behalf of children and families were integral to turn-of-the-century parent education.

Gradually, however, this flexible, broadly conceived approach to parent education gave way to a rigid, narrower view. From the 1920s onward parent educators ignored the importance of parents' role as child advocates, and stressed instead inflexible rules of child development for parents to follow. How this evolution occurred is a fascinating subject: it starts with the work of the famous behaviorist psychologist John Watson, and culminates in the pretentious claims to certainty of innumerable experts today, for example, Burton White in his best-selling manual, The First Three Years of Life. The content of the advice parents receive from experts has changed considerably, to be sure. Today we fret over cognitive development, whereas another generation agonized over toilet training as a sign of potential emotional imbalance. But whatever the specific advice, the experts appear to have compounded rather than relieved parents' anxieties in child rearing. Moreover, they have set such high levels of expectation for parents that frustration, guilt, and a deep sense of failure are almost inevitable. No one benefits--except, perhaps, those who sell books on the subject.

Fortunately, in the last few years a number of able young psychologists--such as Jerome Kagan, Arlene Skolnick, and Alison Clarke-Stewart--have challenged the claim to infallibility that has long marked the field

of child development.¹⁵ Explicitly and implicitly, their work rejects the perfectionist, utopian thrust in experts' child rearing advice which assumes that "only if parents do the right things at the right time will their children turn out to be happy, successful adults," that "parents can raise superior beings, free of the mental frailties of previous generations," and that "if something goes wrong with their child the parents have only themselves to blame."¹⁶ Consider, for example, Clarke-Stewart's uncharacteristic remarks on cognitive development in a pamphlet which forms part of the National PTA's parent education series, Today's Family in Focus, which I helped design. "When you read one of these 'how-to-parent' books, examine the content carefully," she writes, and "be skeptical. Examine the way the book makes you feel. If its authoritative pronouncements make you feel guilty or uptight or hopeless, it has already defeated its purpose, which is to help you become a better, more confident parent....think about your own child, and if the advice given doesn't fit with your perception of your child's needs and characteristics, forget it." May John Watson turn over in his grave!

Just as there is no high road to perfect child development, there is also no single family structure or set of family goals to which all who believe deeply in the family can or should subscribe. One of the hallmarks of American life is its irrepressible diversity, its pluralism. In the family as in other basic social institutions, pluralism is a value to treasure, not fear, as we contemplate the evolution of the family on the way to the 21st century.

FOOTNOTES

1. Van Wyck Brooks, in America's Coming of Age, quoted in Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff, Changing Images of the Family (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 1.
2. Hope Jensen Leichter, "Some Perspectives on the Family as Educator," in Leichter, ed., The Family as Educator (New York: Teachers College Press, 1974), p. 42.
3. Lawrence A. Cremin, "The Family as Educator: Some Comments on the Recent Historiography," in Leichter, ed., The Family as Educator, p. 85.
4. See especially Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), and Philip Greven, Four Generations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).
5. Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1850-1925 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Lawrence A. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Thomas L. Webber, Deep Like the Rivers (New York: Norton, 1978); Nathan Huggins, Black Odyssey (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
6. See especially Carol Stack, All Our Kin (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
7. See especially John Demos, A Little Commonwealth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Lawrence A. Cremin, American Education: The Colonial Experience (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).
8. Kenneth Keniston, All Our Children (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977); Christopher Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
9. R. D. Laing, Politics of the Family (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); David Cooper, Death of the Family (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).
10. Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Random House, 1970).
11. Margaret Mead, "Grandparents as Educators," in Leichter, ed., The Family as Educator, p. 70.
12. See especially William L. O'Neill, Divorce in the Progressive Era (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), and Carl Degler, At Odds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), Chapter 7.
13. Mary Jo Bane, Here to Stay (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 31.

14. See especially "Before Home Start: Notes Toward a History of Parent Education in America, 1897-1929," Harvard Educational Review 46 (August 1976): 436-67, and "The Parent Education Game: The Politics of Child Psychology in the 1970s," Teachers College Record 79 (May 1978): 788-808.
15. Jerome Kagan, "The Baby's Elastic Mind," Human Nature (January, 1978), pp. 66-73; Arlene Skolnick, "The Myth of the Vulnerable Child," Psychology Today (February 1978), pp. 56-65; K. Alison Clarke-Stewart, "Popular Primers for Parents," American Psychologist 33 (April 1978), pp. 359-69.
16. Skolnick, "The Myth of the Vulnerable Child," p. 58.
17. K. Alison Clarke-Stewart, "Developing the Mind of the Child," in Steven L. Schlossman, ed., Today's Family in Focus (Chicago: National PTA, 1977), p. 2.

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