

“Family Values, Moral Values”

by Kenneth D. Whitehead

What about the real situation of family values or moral values in America today? Is there any kind of social or moral crisis or anything resembling one out there?

The truth of the matter is that quite an impressive amount of data has now been accumulated, and quite a number of studies have now been completed, which more than justify the alarm expressed by some of the leaders of our society concerning the condition of the national morals and the condition of the family today. Even if some of those who have raised the cry can be suspected of having ulterior motives, political or otherwise, surely we cannot exclude questions about the social or moral health of our society *because* they happen to get raised in the course of the political process. It is always possible, after all, that even politicians may be sometimes telling the truth.

It is also possible that the media are sometimes not telling the truth. If you think the Murphy Brown show, for example, is really telling it like it is, you may have some difficulty taking in and understanding the import of some of the data and arguments I am going to be presenting. In the light of what follows, I think a better case can be made that the media are very seriously distorting the reality of many sectors of American life today .

In fact, the very ‘first problem we encounter in trying to approach the problem of family values is the problem of even knowing where to begin – in view of the sheer massiveness of the body of hard evidence that things are *not* at all that well currently with American families, especially with the children

members of American families. The truth is that the American family in general is in the midst of suffering the most serious and unprecedented crisis in its entire history; it is more than a family crisis; it is a cultural crisis, and, ultimately, a morality crisis.

Now since I keep mentioning those unpopular words “moral” and “morality” and “moral values,” and since I am going to be mentioning them again – indeed one of my major contentions is going to be that we have to bring our traditional moral code back to America if we are really going to be able to deal with some of the social problems that beset us today – I believe I should explain up front what I mean by “our traditional moral code” lest anyone imagine that I might be in favor of suspending the First Amendment or of “imposing” unwelcome personal moral or religious beliefs on unwilling fellow Americans, or possibly setting up a theocracy or something of the sort.

What I mean by our traditional moral code that I believe has to be substantially brought back is simply the following, and really no more than the following, namely, that people who claim rights assume obligations; that people who assume obligations are bound to carry them out to the degree that they are able to do so; that people are morally responsible for their freely willed actions; that people who make promises are obliged to keep them to the extent that it is within their power; that people are obliged to refrain from actions which are harmful to others and to the common good; and, finally, that the common ideal towards which the moral human person and the free citizen should be expected by society to strive was expressed by the ancient philosopher Socrates when he observed that it is morally preferable to suffer injustice oneself rather than to inflict it on others.

We could argue and debate about details, of course, but that, in my opinion, is pretty much it. If you agree that these few simple moral principles make sense, then it is likely that we

will be able to reach at least some broad agreement, even if we continue to disagree on some details, concerning the very difficult and thorny and troublesome social and moral issues we are going to be discussing. If, on the other hand, you disagree with me completely about these simple basic principles, I suspect you are not going to like this talk very much.

So let's look at the overall situation of "family values" and "moral values" in America today. Looking at this situation, former U.S. Education Secretary and Drug Czar William Bennett, for example, has recently come up with a list of what he calls Leading Cultural Indicators. Since the 1960s the Census Bureau has been publishing the Index of Leading Economic Indicators, on which we regularly base many of our economic, business, and even political decisions. Comes now William Bennett with his Leading Cultural Indicators related to social and family life. What they indicate, according to him, is that, in the third of a century – approximately one generation – that has passed since the year 1960 in America, *there has been a 560% increase in violent crime; a 419% increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling of divorce rates, a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than 200% increase in the teenage suicide rate; and a drop of almost 80 points in the SAT scores.*¹

Earlier, the same William Bennett had attracted a certain amount of attention to a related set of problems when in some of his speeches he alluded to a list of problems that America's school teachers have had with their students: in 1940 they complained of "gumchewing, making noise, running in halls, dress code infractions, and littering"; in 1990 the list included "assault, rape, robbery, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, and suicide."²

Speaking of schools, we find that in California in the 1980s, public schools spent twice as much to restore vandalized school property as they spent on text books. This kind of

statistic is surely related to another statistic, namely, that in the fifty years between 1933 and 1983 the frequency of arrest of juveniles increased by no less than 8000%!³ Or consider yet another one: 70% of all juveniles currently in state reform institutions came from fatherless homes.⁴

Looking more closely at one of those Leading Cultural Indicators compiled by William Bennett, namely, illegitimate births, we find that births to unwed mothers reached a record high of 1,165,384 in 1990, the latest year for which figures are available. This represents a 75% jump from a decade earlier, 1980. 28% of all the births in this country – that is, over a quarter of them – were to unmarried women in 1990, compared to 18.4% ten years earlier in 1980, and only 11% a decade earlier than that in 1970.⁵ Clearly something very significant has been happening out there during these years.

Looking further, we find that of all births to women under age 20, 68% were to unmarried girls⁶ – an especially discouraging statistic when we consider the dismal prospects for children growing up in a single-parent family, usually in poverty, now well established by a fair number of current studies and surveys. And, by the way, other such studies show that daughters of unwed teen mothers strongly tend to become unwed teen mothers themselves.⁷

When speaking of this veritable explosion of births to unwed mothers, we cannot help being reminded of another major element in our current social pathology. I am referring to the children who do not manage to get born at all, in or out of wedlock: of the 1.6 million abortions performed in the U.S. in 1988, the last year for which final figures are available, a whopping 83% were performed on unmarried women.⁸ Approximately one quarter of all these abortions were performed on teenagers.⁹ Legal abortion is patently not the recourse of the worn-out mother of a too-large family.

Illegal in all 50 states prior to 1966 except to save a

mother's life, or, in some states, for very serious health reasons, total legal abortions since 1973, when the Supreme Court legalized the practice, have now mounted up to more than 26 million – 4,400 every day, 1.6 million every year. Of all these abortions, fewer than 7% were related to any woman's medical problem whatsoever, and fewer than 1% involved pregnancies which had resulted from rape or incest.¹⁰ By whatever standard of judgment employed, resort to abortions purely for convenience on such a gigantic scale as this over the past twenty years surely represents another totally unprecedented new social and moral reality for America today.

Legal abortion has often been justified as a "necessary evil" required to deal with some of the very problems of unwed mothers, single parenting, child abuse, feminization of poverty, and the like with which we are otherwise concerned in this discussion; yet what we find is that all these same problems have seen huge, exponential increases in the very same years that legal abortion has been available on demand.

Or consider yet another virulent symptom of our current social pathology related to the decline of traditional family values: what used to be called venereal diseases, and are now called sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), are once again at epidemic proportions in America, particularly among young people, a half century after the discovery of penicillin and other anti-biotic drugs. You would have to have been living on Mars not to have heard about the current AIDS epidemic, of course; but whereas AIDS took the lives of some 54,000 Americans between the years 1981 and 1989, some 80,000 Americans died as a result of other, non-AIDS STDs during those same years, according to U.S. Center for Disease Control statistics. Despite modern medicine, it appears that diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis B, genital herpes, and genital warts continue to afflict increasing numbers of people; teenagers have more STDs than any other group in the United States; ten million cases of non-AIDS

STDs, half the national total, affected people under 25 in 1989.¹¹

These figures on STDs among American young people are inevitably related to the vastly increased rates of engaging in premarital sex registered in the very same years we are dealing with. Sexual activity is apparently now believed by more and more people at a younger and younger age to have no necessary relationship to marriage. For example, the National Center for Health Statistics found that 52% of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 reported having had pre-marital intercourse in 1988, compared to "only" 29% in 1970; I this is yet another one of those phenomenal increases in irresponsible and destructive personal behavior. Moreover, these same teenagers are typically engaging in sexual intercourse with more partners than before: 75% of this group reported two or more partners, and nearly half of them reported four or more partners.¹² Clearly something has been going on out there.

Of all the Leading Cultural Indicators identified by William Bennett indicating the low estate into which social and family life in the United States have fallen, though, perhaps the most serious one is the one which strikes most directly at the heart of the marriage relationship and the integrity of the family itself. I refer to divorce. William Bennett noted that divorce in America has quadrupled since 1960. Psychologist William K. Kilpatrick notes that divorce has risen by 700% in the course of the present century; and that, among many of its major consequences, divorce compounds the difficulty of the moral and character formation of the next generation and thus perpetuates the socially and personally destructive behavior of the young. Kilpatrick has found that "divorce seems to shake the child's confidence in the existence of a morally ordered, meaningful world," and thus jeopardizes the child's own later chances of entering into a stable enduring marriage.¹³ Divorce is thus handed down from generation to

generation, in other words – unless the child is specifically taught a new, more hopeful vision of the future.

Other studies confirm these pessimistic conclusions. The increasing negative and destructive behavior we are seeing among the young generally is often and increasingly – and inescapably – related to the broken families *they* come from.

However we look at the situation, then, today's figures on divorce (or failure to marry in the first place) are pretty grim. To mention just a few: in 1960 the number of marriages in the U.S. outnumbered divorces by nearly four to one; by 1970 it was three to one; and by 1980 only two to one.¹⁴ During the 1980s approximately one of two marriages was ending in divorce,¹⁵ while two out of three remarriages have been failing.¹⁶ The overall divorce rate did slacken somewhat through the 1980s, after having risen phenomenally through the 1970s; in 1988, the latest year for which figures are available, it stood at 18.5 per 1000 married women; still, over a million children saw their parents divorce in 1988, double that of 25 years earlier in 1963.¹⁷

Less than 60% of American children live with both biological parents today. The number of children living with their mothers alone grew from 5.1 million in 1960 to 13.7 million in 1989, and the poverty rate for these same children stood at 55% in 1989 – five times greater than the poverty rate for children living with two parents.¹⁸ It has been estimated that half the children born in America in the 1990s will live in a broken family before they turn eighteen.¹⁹

When considering such statistics as these, we must also remind ourselves of the current situation with regard to divorce laws in the United States. Ever since California in 1970 pioneered the idea of so-called “no-fault divorce” – essentially because the legal profession was tired of having to come up with evidence for such legally accepted “grounds” for divorce as adultery, mental cruelty, or whatever – all fifty states

proceeded in fairly rapid fashion to enact some version of a no-fault divorce law. 20

Now whatever might be said about the defects of the laws which formerly regulated divorce in this country – and there is probably no doubt that a certain amount of dishonesty and hypocrisy often figured in divorce cases – the fact remains that eliminating any consideration of “fault,” as the present laws do, sends a very powerful message of irresponsibility. Under these laws divorce is now nearly everywhere available virtually on demand; anybody who wants to get out of a marriage can fairly quickly and easily do so, often without even any waiting period. Nor does a husband or a wife not wanting to break up the marriage have any real recourse, once one partner has determined upon the break; the only questions to be litigated are generally the property settlement and the custody of the children. In the short space of little more than twenty years, marriage has thus assumed such a state of legal impermanence in this country – there just isn’t all that much “lock” left in “wedlock” any longer! – that perhaps it is no wonder that the social science research is showing that fewer and fewer people are even interested in entering into marriage.

The number of couples now co-habiting without marriage, for example, rose from around 500,000 in 1970 to over 3 million in 1989. In case anyone imagines that the lack of any permanent individual commitment or legally binding tie inherent in the co-habiting relationship somehow represents an improvement on marriage, it should be reported that a recent research study finds that 40% of these co-habiting unions “will disrupt before marriage, and marriages that are preceded by living together have 50% higher disruption rates than marriages without pre-marital cohabitation.”²¹

And so on. We could go on. I could cite many, many more studies and figures and statistics documenting what can only be described as a massive, unexampled breakdown of marriage

and the family in the United States in our day. And I have not even mentioned such matters as the well-documented deleterious effect of today's fragmented family situation on *men*, for example; or how the same situation has significantly increased child abuse. I have not gone into the manifold and very serious – and again, very well documented – problems faced by the children of divorce generally, and those faced by children in mixed or step-parent families. I have not gotten into the problems posed for families and children by working mothers, or the problems of the physical and mental health of children in day care and the problems day-care children later encounter in school and social situations.

While I was writing this speech, a friend I had not heard from in thirty years – following her divorce!- happened to call and re-establish contact. She was proud of how well all of her four now grown children had done on the whole, though two of them, she remarked, had dropped out of high school in the post-divorce years and did not finish until years later. Her testimony: it took all of her children around ten years to recover from the divorce.

However we may view all of these things, then, I would think that at this point we would have to admit that, at the very least, there is a very real problem out there. Family values manifestly do represent something which the American people and their leadership, political and otherwise, have surely got to address in a more serious way than has been the case up to now, if we are not to suffer even more serious troubles and dislocations than we have seen up to now.

Could it just possibly even be, for example, that the huge sympathetic outpouring of public moral support for Murphy Brown was just a bit misplaced? So often we Americans claim to listen to the experts; we claim to make our decisions and base our policies on expertise, particularly scientific expertise. Yet long before Murphy Brown's giving birth became the best-known lying-in in America, the sober, scientific conclusion on

the Murphy Brown type of behavior had already long since come in – and it hardly favored Murphy's choice of a lifestyle.

One example will suffice. Addressing the view advanced by some feminists that "women should not have to marry men to have babies," sociologist Christopher Jencks wrote in a major study that "if our concern is with children rather than parents ... this position is hard to defend. Raising a child is difficult under any circumstances, and it is even more difficult when you try to do it alone than when you share the responsibility. Single mothers have less money than two-parent families, and they also have less time for their children than a couple does..."²²

Ignoring this kind of social indicator is surely as foolish as it would have been to ignore economic indicators about unemployment in the Great Depression of the 1930s!

For any who still need to be convinced, though – or who are just interested in going more seriously into these family issues in general – I recommend two periodical publications which both sponsor and publish serious, in-depth studies on the family and related issues and also call attention to important studies on the family appearing in the professional social science journals and other publications. These periodical publications are *The Family in America*, published by the Rockford Institute,²³ and *Family Policy*, published by the Family Research Council.²⁴

To everyone who is alive and sentient and literate in America today, I recommend an excellent article which appeared in *The Atlantic* magazine for this very month, April, 1993, by writer and researcher Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (no relation). Her article concentrates on and very lucidly summarizes the great body of current social science research which by now has pretty irrefutably established, in the words of *The Atlantic's* own summary, that "children in single-parent or step-parent families are more likely than children in intact families to

be poor, to drop out of school, to have trouble with the law – to do worse, in short, by most definitions of well-being.” The article demonstrates overwhelmingly that the consequences of our loosening the ties that were formerly supposed to bind in the marriage relationship have been especially devastating for America’s children.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s article is entitled nothing else but “Dan Quayle Was Right.” Yes. Who would have believed it after the Murphy Brown episode? But her conclusion is all the more compelling for being understated in terms of the vast amount of thought and data she has assimilated and summarizes. She concludes: “After decades of public dispute about so-called family diversity, the evidence of social-science research is coming in: the dissolution of two-parent families, though it may benefit the adults involved, is harmful to many children, and dramatically undermines our society.”²⁵

Dan Quayle was right, and unless and until we can manage a successful restoration of “family values” in our country, increasing numbers are going to go on suffering acutely throughout all the major sectors of our national life; ultimately this is a moral issue that America has got to face, and let us hope we have the courage to do it sooner rather than later.

Kenneth D. Whitehead, a member of the Catholic League’s board of directors, is author of five books and translator of another 16. He served as Assistant Secretary for Post secondary Education in the Reagan administration. As a foreign service officer he served in Rome, Beirut and Tripoli, and as Chief of the Arabic Service of the Voice of America. This feature article is part of a longer paper delivered at the prestigious Lawrenceville School earlier this year.

NOTES

1 William J. Bennett, “Quantifying America’s Decline,” *The*

Wall Street Journal, March 15, 1993.

2 Quoted by Richard Grenier, "Social Slippage," in *The Washington Times*, March 17, 1993.

3 Cited by Richard Kimball Shinkoskey, "Without Law," in *The Family in America*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 4 January, 1993.

4 Cited by Mona Charen, "Of Course Quayle Was Right," in *The Washington Times*, March 28, 1993

5 National Center for Health Statistics figures reported in *The Washington Times*, February 26, 1993

6 In "Facts at a Glance," March, 1993, published by Child Trends, Inc., Washington, D.C.

7 Figures cited in "New Research," *The Family in America*, November, 1992.

8 Alan Guttmacher Institute figures cited by Carolyn Hax, "No Birth, No Pangs," *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1993.

9 *Loc. cit.*, Note #6 above.

10 *Loc. cit.*, Note #7 above.

11 William Hines, "Beyond AIDS, a Threat from Other Diseases Spread by Sexual Contact," in *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1989.

12 Reported in "New Research," in *The Family in America*, April, 1991.

13 WilliamK. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, pp. 249-250.

14 Megan Rosenfeld, "Broken Children, Broken Homes," *The Washington Post*, May 31, 1987.

15 Cited by Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, New

York:Oxford University Press, 16 1991, p. 5.

16 Cited in "New Research," *The Family in America*, December, 1992.

17 Cited in "New Research," *The Family in America*, August, 1991.

18 "The Two-Parent Family," in *Family Policy*, 19 April, 1992.
20

19 *Loc. cit.*, Note #3 above.

20 On the development of no-fault divorce laws, see Herbert Jacob, *Silent Revolution: The Transformation of Divorce Law in the United States*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

21 Quoted in "NewResearch, " *The Family in America*, June, 1990.

22 Christopher Jencks, "Is the American Underclass Growing?" in *The Urban Underclass*, editors, Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1991.

23 *The Family in America*, amonthly publication of the Rockford Institute, 934 North Main Street, 24Rockford, IL 61103-7061. \$21.00 per year.

24 Family Policy, a bi-monthly publication of the Family Research Council, 700 Thirteenth Street, NW , Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005. \$15.00 per year.

25 Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," in *The Atlantic*, Vol. 271, No. 4, April, 1993.