

FIRST PRINCIPLES

A Return to
Humanity's Shared Traditions

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I WHERE IS THE CONFLICT?

Of all the conflicts that embroil the world today, the one that holds the darkest threat of destruction, but also the brightest promise for creation, is the conflict between modern and traditional values. Sometimes the conflict is obvious, as in the debate over abortion; sometimes it is hidden, complicating disputes which appear to be ethnic, regional, or national.

America, in particular, shows confusion between its traditionalist and its innovative values. In the United States, we tend to see our biggest divide as being between the Left — the Democrats and their various allies — and the Right — the Republicans and *their* various allies. We generally assign people with “modern” values to the Left, and people with more “traditional” values to the Right. The truth is not so simple. For instance, the televised sex, violence and crudeness that traditionalists often decry is broadcast because of marketing decisions made in corporate board rooms, a very Right-Republican environment. This runs against the view that the Left is always the agent of social novelty, and the Right is always ally of traditional morality. Remember too, that the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and the Progressive movement of the early 1900s, both generally seen as impulses from the Left, and

resisted by the Right, got much of their start and core support from those traditional institutions — churches.

These, and other similar paradoxes, are resolved when we discard the idea that the Left is “modern,” and the Right is “traditional.” They are both modern. Neither is traditional. They are both anti-tradition.

If they are both modern, what do we mean by “modern”? What could the Left and the Right have in common, they seem so antagonistic toward each other? Finally, what do we mean by “traditional”?

The Left and the Right are both modern in that they both believe that personal happiness *and* the common good are best achieved when each person makes his or her own life choices without any coercion or pressure from government, or “society,” or any other over-arching institution. The individual is “free,” or “disconnected,” depending on your bias. Modernism has a laissez-faire, or libertarian, spirit. It aims to maximize the decision-making power of the individual, and to minimize the claims of the collective: “society.”

We call this perspective “modern,” because it is in opposition to “traditional,” but as an idea it’s not new. It has been around at least since Rousseau, Blake, and Whitman. Nevertheless, modernism has only gained widespread institutional acceptance in the last 40 years or so — many organizations use its rhetoric — and real mass participation in the last 25. Before that it was the province of writers, artists, philosophers, and so on — the avant-garde. It is an attractive theory, rational, generous, and hopeful, but it had never been tested on a society-wide scale until now.

Modernism has many sources, but one of the most important is the philosophy of the eighteenth-century French thinker, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, a rebel and a romantic figure himself, was knocked about by fortune and his

writings became the touchstone of revolutionary and social movements around the world. His ideas influenced the American, French, and other nationalist and Marxist revolutions. He believed that people are naturally good and cooperative, and that evil in the world comes from this natural goodness being perverted by social restrictions and institutions, not from human nature itself. He was convinced that people who were free of those restrictions would be free of the distortions they cause, and would live in harmony and peace. Rousseau identified human creations, not human nature, as the source of injustice. Therefore, he idealized the hypothetical man-in-nature, free of social restraints: the “noble savage.” The noble savage exhibits (so Rousseau thought) all the virtues that Rousseau predicted.

The Left and Right each carry modernism’s spirit into a different area. The Left emphasizes social libertarianism, and the Right emphasizes economic libertarianism. The Left tends to minimize the need for social coordinators and regulators. Ironically, the Left does initiate a lot of laws, but its goal is to increase individual liberty, to increase choices, often for a target group which has been determined to be unfairly restrained by prejudice, custom, or market forces. Such things as anti-discrimination laws, hate crime laws, even minimum wage laws, all have this aim. On the other hand, the Right tends to minimize the need for economic coordinators and regulators. Its method is to give latitude by reducing legislation. The Right are the ecologists of finance. “Don’t interfere with it,” they say.

The Left’s social libertarianism stresses the belief that we should all be able to access and explore a variety of lifestyle options so that we will be able to discover and express our most authentic natures. Furthermore, the Left believes that since we then would be “centered,” and not driven by neurotic dissatisfactions, we would relate to each other harmoniously,

peacefully. Society and the world would be an aggregate of very different, but mutually satisfied and respectful, individuals. Social and personal dysfunctions would tend to fade because they are the result of dishonest, fearful, inauthentic conventions. Social justice *and* self-fulfillment are the double fruit of the unflinchingly honest pursuit of our true selves.

The Right's economic libertarianism stresses the belief in the Free Marketplace, and our right to pursue, unhindered, our material well being as far as our talents will take us. Furthermore, the Right believes that the free operation of the marketplace, through its various features for self-regulation — supply and demand, the production of goods and services to fill needs (if enough people have a need, the market will fill it because it is a market), and the equitable nature of contractual relationships — will all keep society balanced, harmonious, and just. Thus once again, the fulfillment of the individual, *and* the common good, are both achieved by keeping all avenues open, and letting each individual choose which he or she wants to explore.

Our perception that the Left and Right are “opposites” comes out of the conflict they have over the role of government. The Right believes government should not interfere in our economic lives, the Left believes that government should “interfere” to the extent necessary to offset the more direct impact economics has on our personal lives. The Left sees money as external to the person and somewhat arbitrary. Finance should not dictate the quality of a person's life. The Right sees the economic controls and firewalls that the Left might propose as being dangerous tamperings with the Marketplace's self-adjusting nature, as well as a denial of the individual's right to make economic choices.

This disagreement is not to be minimized, but we should keep it in perspective; it is a conflict between two

interpretations of modernism. In fact, there are signs that these interpretations are beginning to blend. We live in the age of the “boho” — the bourgeois bohemian; we see the hip financier, the business tycoon who does yoga, the high-powered lawyer who really digs the blues, and his (or her) Harley. Modernism may be growing more and more unified, in tastes, at least.

In politics, the distinctions between Left and Right appear as sharp as ever; partisanship at all levels of government has become overwhelming, sometimes forcing the civic machinery to grind to a stop, but the Democrats and Republicans may be blurring in one negative way. Many Americans share a growing sense that the Left and the Right are equally self-serving, impotent, even destructive, in their methods and aims. Their rhetoric seems to be predictably scripted ideological responses that have little to do with our real circumstances and needs. The Left promises needed social programs, but downplays or denies their cost in increased taxes, government paternalism, and bureaucratic control of our culture. The Right promises material prosperity and economic independence, but downplays or denies their cost in increased corporate and commercial control of our culture, and the environmental cost of decreased regulation on pollution and land-use.

As acrimony between the two parties has escalated, the accusations of each against the other have become monuments of blame placing and doublethink. This became painfully obvious during the Clinton impeachment proceedings, and the “hung” election of 2000. Meanwhile, the public feels more and more alienated.

Many, maybe a majority, of Americans want a real alternative. The problem is that, since the dialogue between the Democrats and the Republicans — social libertarianism and economic libertarianism — has been the only political language spoken in the U.S. for generations, we have trouble imagining

what a real alternative would be. What would it promise, and what would it cost? How would it work? We are like the proverbial fish in the sea that can't conceive of what "wet" means because it has never known anything else. It won't understand "wet" until it encounters "dry." We're all wet, and we still don't know it.

The limited perspective that our Left/Right paradigm condemns us to is the reason why our recent attempts at creating third parties have been confused and unsuccessful. Generally, these experiments seize on a specific issue from the Left or Right's agenda, and then expand it into an entire frame of reference. The Greens have done this with the environment, and the Libertarians have done it with the idea of limited government. The Reform Party's only defined program was to *be* an alternative, somehow, someday. It has gotten by so far with celebrity, and independently wealthy, candidates, and a self-proclaimed "common-sense" approach to issues on a case-by-case basis. This actually works, to a degree, because it allows more flexibility than the ideologically dictated programs of the Democrats and the Republicans. In the long run, though, because the modernist pronouncements of our two major parties is the only political language spoken in America, a third party with no particular plan will end up speaking that same language by default. So it is that the Reform Party has tilted toward economic libertarianism, and has ended up looking like eccentric, or innovative (depending on your bias) Republicans, but Republicans nevertheless.

Even more, not only are our modernist political philosophies unable to solve our social problems, but our modernist political philosophies are the *cause* of many of our social problems. This is because the thoroughgoing individualism of modernism does not give people the social or communal attitudes and tools needed to create a strong

community. Thus, the more modernist we become, the more certain characteristic problems increase, and the less able we are to solve them. This has become more and more the case since about 1960.

A. Francis Fukuyama writes in his definitive article, "The Great Disruption," printed in the May, 1999, *Atlantic Monthly*,

The perceived breakdown of social order is not a matter of nostalgia, poor memory, or ignorance about the hypocrisies of earlier ages. The decline is readily measurable in statistics on crime, fatherless children, broken trust, reduced opportunities for and outcomes from education, and the like.¹

Incidentally, Fukuyama's article is not an indictment of modernism; it is actually guardedly optimistic, but it is nevertheless clear on the point just quoted.

It continues,

This period [in question], roughly the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, was marked by seriously deteriorating social conditions in most of the industrialized world. Crime and social disorder began to rise, making inner-city areas of the wealthiest nations on earth almost uninhabitable....Marriages and births declined and divorce soared; and one out of every three children in the United States and more than half of all children in Scandinavia were born out of wedlock....these changes...occurred over a wide range of similar countries; and they all appeared at roughly the same period in history.¹

As people soon discovered, there are serious problems with a culture of unbridled individualism, in which the breaking of rules becomes, in a sense, the only remaining rule.²

In a similar vein, Gertrude Himmelfarb says in her insightful book, *One Nation, Two Cultures*,

1. Fukuyama, 1999, p. 56.

2. *Ibidem*, pp. 55 & 56.

One does not have to be nostalgic for a golden age that never was to appreciate the contrast between past and present. The ratio of out-of-wedlock births has increased six fold since 1960...the number of children living with one parent has risen from less than one-tenth to more than one quarter....It has often been observed that when Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his percipient report on the breakdown of the black family in 1965, the black illegitimacy ratio was only slightly higher than the white ratio is today, and considerably lower than it is now for the country at large.³

Senator Moynihan has encapsulated the social and cultural situation of our time in the brilliant phrase “defining deviancy down.” What was once stigmatized as deviant behavior is now tolerated, even sanctioned; what was once regarded as abnormal has now been normalized....Charles Krauthammer has proposed a complimentary concept, “defining deviancy up.” As deviancy is normalized, so what was once normal becomes deviant. The kind of family that has been regarded for centuries as natural and moral...is now seen as pathological.⁴

Melissa Ludtke’s book, *On our Own*, reports that, “In 1950, only four percent of American babies were born to mothers who were not married....fifty years later that figure is up to a third of all births.”⁵

There is a whole literary, cinematic, and broadcast industry devoted to “debunking” the traditional family. Its intent seems to be to prove that the “normal family” — Mom and Dad and kids — is actually a cauldron of stupidity, oppression, and abuse; and conversely, almost any atypical family — single Mom (or Dad) and kids, homosexual couple or circle of close friends and kids — is a center of good sense, wisdom, and love. *Pleasantville*, *1,000 Acres*, *The Color Purple*, *The Simpsons*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Married with Children*, *American Beauty*, *Cider House Rules*, *Dead Poets’ Society*, and many more, are all examples of this trend. Some of these

3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

4. Himmelfarb, 1999, p. 25.

5. Ludtke, 1997, cover flap.

works are well done and well intended, but taken as a group, they do more than simply criticize abuses; they have the effect of discrediting the family structure itself. That is a structure that it is beginning to look like we ought not do without.

Aside from anecdotal success stories about atypical families — and we don't want to detract from any successes — experience and statistics are showing that, generally, divorce and single-parent upbringings put kids more at risk for social problems than do upbringings in two-parent families, imperfect though they may be. By implying that the opposite is true, modernist art and media plot a course into social difficulties, and try to convince us that it's progress. It's as if, for instance, we were presented with a genre of stories about police brutality, and happy communities without police. The implication would be that we would be better off without police. But reality has its iron imperatives, which would soon show us how foolish such a notion would be. Police brutality exists, of course, and needs to be rooted out, but in general, the larger effect of having police is to protect us from more widespread brutality.

Continuing with examples of defining deviancy up, Himmelfarb observes,

Smoking has been elevated to the rank of vice and sin, while sexual promiscuity is tolerated as a matter of individual right and choice.⁶

Finally, she relates an interesting passage from Joseph Schumpeter's 1942 *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*.

Capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own; the bourgeois finds to his amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at

6. Himmelfarb, 1999, p. 28.

the credentials of kings and popes, but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values.⁷

Though set in the Communist/Capitalist rhetoric of his time, Schumpeter's comments accurately map how we got to be a culture where, "The breaking of rules becomes...the only remaining rule."

As of now, the crime rate and some other negative social indicators have dropped somewhat since the mid-1990s, but those declines are from a peak of several multiples of their 1960 level. In addition, these indicators of social disruption may not be as acute as in the mid-'90s, but they are noticeably more widespread. They are no longer confined to areas of poverty, where they might be expected for material reasons, but they have become common in suburbs and rural areas.

These trends should make us suspicious, at least, that modernism does not deliver what it promises. Or, it delivers, but then some. Perhaps, to be truthful, the modernist should tell us,

You are now more free than you've ever been before. You can pursue every kind of fulfillment. Find your true self, get rich, the sky's the limit; but, if you go out at night for a quart of milk or a loaf of bread, watch your back, beware the stranger, keep out of the shadowy side streets. And by the way, we have innovative counseling techniques for your distraught children. Remember, they're even more free than you are.

Of course, this is facetious; there are plenty of communities, and families, and children who are faring well today. Nevertheless, there are enough disasters, more than there have been in a long while, to say that they are characteristic of our age. In the nineteenth century, not every American went west to pan for gold or to homestead, but enough did to stamp that

7. Quoted in Himmelfarb, 1999, p. 12.

adventurous image on that time. Likewise, the automobile decals of a leering little boy peeing, and the motto, “No Fear,” next to him, could stamp that malicious image on our time.

Perhaps it’s time to revisit modernism’s one real rival and alternative, traditionalism. That’s a scary thought for many; in the modernist language that we are limited to, traditionalism is a negative term. It reads as, “Social oppression of the individual,” “Hidebound resistance to change,” and, “Hypocritical promotion of standards that its own supporters don’t live up to.” These images of traditionalism are stereotypes created during modernism’s rise to cultural dominance. Like all stereotypes, there is some truth to them, but also like all stereotypes, they don’t really tell the truth.

Let’s try to think outside the modernist box. Let’s try a different mental template. We need to consider: what *is* the aim of traditionalism, and how is it different from modernism? Also, how do the shortcomings and contradictions in modernism cause us the problems already cited, and how would traditionalism try to solve them?

The primary way that modernism and traditionalism differ is where they believe the standard that defines right and wrong, and outlines how people ought to act, is located. In a sense, we might say that they differ in where they believe sacredness comes from. The modernist believes that, ultimately, it comes from the self. “Every person is an artist and every artist is a priest.” Each self is holy: Walt Whitman, Jackson Pollack.

The essential and beloved mistake of the Rousseauian modernists is their understanding that humanity and the world are holy, but their lack of understanding that the human situation is complex, divided — poisoned, if you will — by ego and self-centeredness, which is as natural as our claim to transcendence. Alan Ginsberg sings to us in “Howl”:

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole are holy! Everything is holy! Everybody's holy! Everywhere is holy! Everyday is in eternity! Every man's an angel!⁸

Well, yes. But that's only half the story. The other half is mankind's obvious shortfall from holy. To ignore that shortfall is to ignore a lot. To ascribe that shortfall to our particular culture and society is to be unaware of other cultures and societies. If all is holy, then nursing a child and murdering a rival are of equal value, or for that matter, nursing a child and murdering a child. Relativism's solutions for this kind of dilemma are unconvincing. No matter what the logic tells us, we know there's something wrong, here. There is a problematic counter-current in the human soul, the human experience, human behavior. Modernism doesn't want to accept this complexity. It doesn't want to accept the self-regulation and social regulation, the "Thou shalt nots," that this confounding complexity implies. Traditionalism, on the other hand, accepts it, eyes wide open, and head on.

Perhaps as direct an expression as any of the modernist viewpoint is the statement by Simone de Beauvoir, a mid-20th century intellectual and a friend of Jean Paul Sartre: "I don't want my life to obey any other will but my own." If the self is holy, no one or thing has a claim on it or authority over it. No room for a social dimension, there.

The operation of this kind of thinking can be seen in almost all areas of our society. In education, for instance, where most "advanced" thinking regards grades based on objective standards (like tests) as very "old school" (so to speak). Students should not be evaluated in reference to how much material of a lesson they have mastered, but in reference to themselves, their own

8. Ginsberg, 1967, p. 21.

progress, their own needs, their own interests, using portfolios, teacher reports and so on. Of course, to teach effectively, we need to be attentive to a child's talents and problems; but a child is not well prepared for any level of life by being taught that he or she is the standard of all things.

The traditionalist believes that sacredness and legitimacy come from a source *external* to the self. This source or standard is much more profound, the traditionalist believes, than any philosophy the self could make on its own; in fact, the most important choice the self can make is to choose to follow, to choose to internalize, this external standard.

This is not to say that self-fulfillment isn't important. It is. People live and work happiest and best when they are involved in something that comes from the heart. Nevertheless, self-fulfillment shouldn't be the primary goal because, when it is, all sorts of essential priorities get knocked out of order. Besides, self-fulfillment really can't even be achieved to its most rewarding degree if it is promoted above the external standard, the external sacred. Furthermore, the sacred standard is public, communal. It applies to all of us, everywhere, by virtue of our common humanity. It is a sort of "Law of human physics," or, "The program best suited to the human hardwiring." Unlike modernism, which believes that diverse people making diverse choices leads to both fulfillment *and* the common good, traditionalism believes that it is each person's best interest and general obligation to submit to the shared standard.

There's a red-flag word if there ever was one: "submit." Remember, think outside the modernist box. This is not a slavish submission that reduces the person; it is the one act the self can make to be really fulfilled. It can be thought of more as "joining up," or "volunteering." The sacred standard asserts that each person has dignity and free will, and so the standard operates only when freely chosen. Rather than surrendering one's

individuality, embracing the standard is more like choosing sanity over neurosis.

An objective, external standard doesn't mean that finding what's right is always a mechanical thing, a simple look at the rule book (though sometimes it is). Human circumstances, motives, and goals are often complex, and require experience and discernment to determine where lines of right and wrong are to be drawn. Sometimes it takes a sharp pencil, indeed. However, this doesn't mean it isn't worth doing; human relationships are not open-ended. The right map can get you through the heart of the most complicated city as well as across the open prairie on an interstate.

The modernist's characteristic objection is that there can be no universal standard. Humanity has so many different moral codes or value systems (we can use those terms interchangeably with "standards"), that no one particular code can claim preeminence. Any attempt to persuade other people to conform to your own morality is bad manners at best, imperialism, or genocide at worst. Then, in a characteristic contradiction, the modernist goes on to tell us what standard we ought to follow. Since we live in a shrinking world, where people of so many different cultures are thrown together, we should be tolerant and respectful of the different ways of others. In other words, when confronted with relativism, be polite.

The modernists are correct in their description of the world, but wrong in their prescription for the world.

VI THE SELLING OF PERSONAL GROWTH DIVORCE

Let's look at one case of modernism not knowing that the gun was loaded. Since the 1960s, but most especially in the 1970s and 1980s, marriage as an institution and as a lifestyle has undergone a massive assault from the modernist camp. An article from the April 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* (already years ago, but more timely than ever), was titled "Dan Quayle was Right" (a reference to the then-Vice President's critical remarks about the popular television character, Murphy Brown, who endorsed single-motherhood) recounts the strategies, and reports the results, of that assault. We have already seen that marriage is in trouble in the U.S. and the rest of the industrialized world. The rate of marital break-ups, and children born to unmarried parents (and in practical terms, usually to an unmarried *parent*) has risen dramatically in the last three or four decades.

The "Quayle" article says:

Nowhere has family breakup been greeted by a more triumphant rhetoric of renewal than in America.

What is striking about this rhetoric is how deeply it reflects classic themes in American public life. It draws its language and imagery from the nation's founding myth. It depicts family break-up as a drama of revolution and rebirth. The nuclear family represents the corrupt past....breaking up

the family is like breaking away from Old World tyranny. Liberated from the bonds of family, the individual can achieve independence and experience a new beginning, a fresh start, and a new birth of freedom. In short, family breakup recapitulates the American experience.”³⁵

Ego can wave the flag and get out of a mighty big commitment.

Shari L. Thurer’s, *The Myths of Motherhood* (written in 1994, after the Quayle article, showing that the thrill hadn’t yet gone out of “debunking” marriage) discussed the Murphy Brown controversy this way:

By any standard, Murphy Brown — who would have been stoned in Babylonia, or burned at the stake in early modern Europe — was a hit at the box office. Brown had proudly and joyously borne an illegitimate baby, and the public obviously shared her maternal bliss. Her defiant act liberated women from the tyranny of mainstream domestic expectations, expectations that had long ceased to reflect reality, given the number of single mothers in this country...Brown’s insouciant motherhood has signaled a sea change in the unconscious sexism that once pervaded everyday life. She has forged new ways for women to mother....³⁶ By unmasking the myths of motherhood, we can enlarge the possibility for taking control — through education, public policy, psychotherapy, even moral preachment — to achieve the climate we desire.³⁷

What will the social costs be “to achieve the climate we desire”?

The Thurer book is part of a genre of pro-divorce works that was widespread from about 1975 to 1995, and is still quite active, and which included other offerings such as one mentioned in the Quayle article — *Creative Divorce: A New*

35. Dafoe-Whitehead, 1993, pp. 83 & 84.

36. Thurer, 1994, p. 297.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Opportunity for Personal Growth. That book gives us this advice: “Children can survive any family crisis without permanent damage — and grow as human beings in the process...” (Dafoe-Whitehead, p. 60).³⁸ The article says that supporters of the creative divorce perspective argued that:

Single parent and stepparent families created a more extensive kinship network than the nuclear family. This network would envelop children in a web of warm and supportive relationships. “Belonging to a step family means there are more people in your life,” a children’s book published in 1982 notes. “More sisters and brothers, including the step ones. More people you think of as aunts and uncles. More cousins. More neighbors and friends...”³⁹

This sounds suspiciously like an adult trying to convince a kid that something they both know is rotten will be great fun. “Open wide, this won’t hurt a bit, and when Dr. Filler is done, you’ll get a new toothbrush!”

Most of us have bought, often literally, the sales pitch. Modernism of the left tells us we can do whatever we want; modernism of the right tells us we can have whatever we want. We all have been seduced by one or the other of these messages to a greater or lesser degree. Some of us may have been caught by bad luck — unwanted children, unexpected addictions, sexually transmitted diseases — and are now forced by circumstances to make a virtue of necessity. We bought the sales pitch because it resonated with every American notion of freedom, individual rights, and Rousseauian authenticity — but they did not resonate with the First Principles, so we found ourselves having problems.

38. Quoted in Dafoe-Whitehead, 1993, p. 60.

39. *Ibid.*

The idea of the experts was that divorce, and the unmarried state, were innovative tools that would actually enhance family life. This was one of those counter-intuitive positions that modernism loves to stake out to highlight its startling intellectual and philosophical acumen. Professors often try to dazzle their students with this kind of stuff. The trouble is, the *results* haven't been very counter-intuitive. To be fair, there have been some people who have been empowered to leave really bad, abusive marriages, and that's good; but many more people have left not-so-bad marriages: marriages that would have had potential for success and happiness in a more supportive social environment.

The modernist prediction that loosening the definition of family and the bonds of marriage would lead to big, happy, well-functioning, non-authoritarian "modern" families (really, a warmed-over version of the 1960s dream of communal life, which didn't live up to expectations, either) almost never happened. (See the Dutch movie, "Antonia's Line," for a perfect cinematic depiction of the dream.) What did happen instead — not always, but often — was the creation of chaotic and abusive households with distraught, inadequately socialized kids. Instead of the promised utopia, too often we got tragedy.

There is a paradox connected with the children of divorce. Sometimes they are distraught because they are dreadfully unhappy, but sometimes they are distraught from being too indecently happy. Often, single parents are so overtaxed by the demands put on them that they can't effectively say "no" to their children. These parents have more than enough stress in their lives with the challenge of work, kids, and money shortages. To avoid the extra pressure — maybe the final straw — of holding their children to steady boundaries, they try to be their kids' pal, and act more like a peer than a parent. After all, these parents are often pretty young themselves, and may be looking for a mate, or

at least romance, so they don't want to give the appearance of being out-of-it, old parental-type fuddy-duddies. For their own self-image as well as for household harmony (at least short-term), such parents may bribe their kids with permissions and gifts, thereby teaching all the wrong lessons.

Other single parents may try to give guidance, and draw limits, but are too overwhelmed to hold the line. The kids learn that with a ritual argument, an increase in the volume and quantity of complaint, the parent caves in. Those kids *really* learn the wrong lesson, and both types of parents end up with similar results. In both cases, the kids are as gleefully unrestricted as the boys in Pinocchio's carnival-like, "Playland," who were able to indulge themselves however they wished, and slowly turned into donkeys as they did so.

Such kids don't know it, but they are being devastated. Most of them will probably never develop the self-discipline to, say, learn to play a musical instrument, or to speak a foreign language, or to winnow anything difficult and complex and rewarding out of life. Instead, they are bound to the shallow entertainments, either electronic or chemical, that they can buy. Hence, the "dumbing down" we see in modern culture, where there is a significant increase in these unique, superficially happy, truly ruined families.

A recent study, the largest of its kind ever conducted, used the Swedish national registry to follow nearly a million children over a ten-year period, and examined the impact of family structure on their lives. The Associated Press article that informed the general public about the study, "At Risk Kids," (Jan. 24, '03), says: "The scientists found that children with single parents were twice as likely to develop a psychiatric illness such as severe depression or schizophrenia, to kill themselves or attempt suicide, and to develop an alcohol-related

disease.”⁴⁰ A far cry from “Antonia’s Line.” If you want to double the risk for those casualties, encourage single-parent families.

The “At Risk Kids” article goes on to say that:

Girls were three times more likely to become drug addicts if they lived with a sole parent, and boys were four times more likely....

“If you really thought that it was the income that makes the difference, you would think that Swedish lone mothers [because they have national health care, and other government-provided assistance] would do a lot better than the British or those in the U.S., but they look very similar,” said Sara McLanahan, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University.⁴¹

In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, based on a smaller landmark study that followed children of divorce for twenty-five years, found:

The contrast between [children of divorce] and children from good intact homes, as both go in search of love and commitment, is striking....Adults in their twenties from good or even moderately unhappy intact families had a fine understanding of the demands and sacrifices required in a close relationship. They had memories of how their parents struggled and overcame differences, how they cooperated in a crisis. They developed a general idea about the kind of person they expected to marry. Most important, they did not expect to fail...But in coping with the normal stress in a marriage, adults from a divorced family were at a grave disadvantage. Anxiety about relationships was at the bedrock of their personalities and endured even in very happy marriages.⁴²

The sobering truth is that we have created a new kind of society that offers greater freedom and more opportunities for many adults, but carries a serious hidden cost. Many people,

40. Quoted in La Crosse Tribune, 1-24-03, p. A-1.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Wallerstein, Lewis, Blakeslee, 2002, p. 300.

adults and children alike, are in fact not better off. We have created new kinds of families in which relationships are far more fragile and often unreliable. Children today receive far less nurturance, protection, and parenting than was their lot a few decades ago.⁴³

In fact, we've engineered ourselves into the worst of both worlds. Not only do we not have the strict guidelines which in the past helped channel the wilder energies of human behavior, but which many who came of age in the last several decades decided were an unnecessary burden; neither do we have the happier, more caring society that the advocates of dropping the guidelines promised. We find now, too late, that some burdens are legitimate and necessary if we are to avoid the greater burdens of living at the edge of social crisis. Some might say that these dislocations are the price we ought to endure for a lively and vibrant democracy; how is it that they can't endure secondhand cigarette smoke, but can countenance double and triple drug addiction and suicide rates among children of single parents?

Modernists have conducted a laudable crusade against smoking. Considering the devastation smoking causes, this anti-smoking campaign was a great public service, and an important counterbalance to the propaganda of the tobacco companies. Somewhat similarly, modernists are beginning an effort to have gun violence recognized as a community health problem, like tuberculosis or whooping cough. Along with, "Do you smoke?," and, "Do you take any medications?," doctors are being encouraged to ask, "Do you have any guns in your home?" If the answer is "Yes," the patient will be advised on the risks of gun ownership, and some must-do's of gun safety.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

These campaigns are legitimate efforts at bettering the public welfare, and are based on scientific studies and rational analysis, areas that modernists like to claim for their own, and condemn traditionalists for being inept in.

Given the current crisis of the family, and its consequences, one might suggest that it's time to mount a "Save marriage, save our kids" campaign, as well. Shouldn't we create a school curriculum that teaches that important relationships like mother-father, parent-child, are best safeguarded by marriage? Shouldn't we have doctors give advice concerning marital health? Shouldn't we educate and legislate for the goal of decreasing divorce and single parenting? Isn't this a public health issue like smoking or gun ownership, and doesn't it merit a similar response?

Apparently not. Modernism pulls back from any campaign to avoid broken or never-put-together families, even though the evidence is showing the tragedy and hardship that proliferate in those circumstances. To the contrary, modernism encourages those circumstances. That's because they go right where modernism wants to go: they promote individual choices over interpersonal accommodations; they glorify, even raise to mythic proportions, opposition to social norms, and they ridicule tradition. All of this is done with a kind of Orwellian "double think" wherein no matter how wide a disconnect exists between stated aims and real outcomes, no matter how clear cut and damaging the results of these supposed innovations are, modernists challenge, minimize, ridicule, ignore, and finally accept them as the cost of doing business.

The pattern is, first: "This will be great; it will make the world a wonderful place." Then it's: "Well, this is rugged, but it's the right road. We have to do this to make the world a better place." Finally, it's: "I know this hurts, and it doesn't really help

society, but society is oppressive anyway, and if it's necessary to hurt society to live full, free lives, that's progress."

The contradiction is that we *are* society; the mistake is in thinking we are somehow separate from, and above, it. So it is with modernism's attack on marriage. The "More extensive kinship network," the web of "Warm and supportive relationships," were all self-delusion and sales pitch. What we have encountered instead of a web of "warm and supportive relationships" is a tangle of lovers and live-ins, past encounter has-beens, serial fathers and any pal who can baby-sit. And they all most assuredly are willing to put in the same amount of love, energy and money as we are to help us raise our kids, right? Wrong.

The raising of a child is such a demanding, expensive, life-changing, total duty that most people who are only peripherally connected to the child cannot be induced to surrender so much of their substance to what they see as someone else's project.

Marriage, and a culture of marriage, is the strong medicine we need for giving essential love, support, and guidance to children, and for harnessing in a positive way the incredible energies of young adulthood. A culture of marriage would be a social atmosphere in which marriage is promoted by books, media, speakers, academics, and lawyers, and public opinion, just as the culture of divorce is promoted now.

Today, the effects of the culture of divorce are piling up and beginning to seep into our consciousness; the "come dance around the May pole with us; be free to be you, let me be free to be me," promotions of divorce from the 1970s and 1980s don't play so well anymore; they have lost much of their credibility. The tone of the promotions has changed; but the goal remains the same: to be free of traditional relationships, no matter what the cost. The message today about divorce and single parenthood is a more dogged, "Ok, it's tough, but aren't these people heroes

for trying to go it alone? Besides, it's our right, and anyway, the genie is out of the bottle, so there's no going back."

Consider Melissa Ludtke's 1997 book, *On Our Own, Unmarried Motherhood in America*, which has a section title that is apparently a direct reference to the *Atlantic* "Quayle" article: "Dan Quayle may have been right, but Murphy Brown is definitely winning."⁴⁴

The implications of the title of the book itself are worth pondering: "On our own," implying "With no help," and perhaps "against the odds," coupled with "Unmarried Motherhood." It seems to paint a picture of a band of mothers, alone and forlorn, clutching their babies in one hand while shielding themselves from the storm with the other. The picture is not so far from reality; but the spirit of the book seems to be not that we should come to the aid of these mothers who have ended up in difficult circumstances, but that somehow we, as a society, are committing an injustice by allowing these circumstances to be difficult. Well, all the king's horses and all the king's men aren't going to make these circumstances any better. Sometimes people fall into them by bad luck, sometimes by bad choices. The best we can do is to try to warn people away from them.

Often, the single mom is in the position she's in because of an irresponsible dad. Too often, the problem of single motherhood is really just the last stage of the deeper problem of dysfunctional fatherhood. Far too many men don't want to accept the new commitments that, as a father, they owe to child and mother. These dads run the gamut from simply immature and unprepared to criminally negligent, to just plain criminal. They want to continue to play like boys, and fail to understand that parenthood demands life changes. Men have to be reeducated to the notions of honor and duty if we want to see a

44. Ludtke, 1997, p. 419.

culture change regarding single parenting. That brings up the question: do we want to see such a change?

When we view Pinker's (among others) assessment of the conditions of human nature, when we observe the increased negative impact of single parenting more or less regardless of resources available to the parent, on children, we can make the general assessment that single parenting is a bad idea. Single parents are often courageous, energetic, and resourceful, but they are stuck in a bad place. We can apply resources to help those who are stuck in that bad place, but we shouldn't be called upon to supply limitless resources to transform a bad place into a good place. It wouldn't transform, anyway. We need to help those who are stuck, and at the same time, hang a sign up that says, "Don't go there."

Is modernism listening? No. The dust-jacket blurb of another recent book, *For Better or Worse, Divorce Reconsidered*, tells us that the author "pinpoints 'windows of change' that allow some people to fashion the challenges of divorce into an opportunity"... and that "divorce presents a greater risk to adolescent children; and how monitoring and authoritative parenting can provide needed buffering against the negative effects of divorce." Yet the same blurb describes the book as "debunking popular wisdom on the devastating psychological and social effects of divorce."⁴⁵ (Heatherington & Kelly, inside cover front flap).

Saying that there are "windows of change" that are evidently so small they have to be pinpointed, where challenges can be turned into opportunities, and that authoritative parenting and monitoring can buffer adolescents from negative effects, hardly sounds like a ringing endorsement of divorce. It sounds like there are limited occasions where you can minimize

45. Heatherington & Kelly, 2002, cover flap.

the negative impacts, yet we're still told that the book "debunks" notions that divorce has devastating effects. Is this supposed to mean that we should reconsider divorce; that because divorce may be survivable, we should view it as an acceptable or perhaps desirable outcome?

This is like saying that car crashes aren't really so bad. If you learn certain techniques, wear your seat belt, tuck and roll, you may live. Actually many people, even the majority, survive car crashes. Often, these survivors even go on to have rewarding lives. That doesn't mean that car crashes produce rewarding lives. Also, don't forget that too often the crash *does* end a life, rewarding or not. There's nothing in these perspectives on car crashes that should convince us that they are positive, that we ought to want to have one. We don't need to "reconsider" car crashes, even if they do sometimes result in insurance money. No way is the risk and upset worth the limited possibility of a reward, or even just a return to normalcy.

We are told,

The current narrow focus in the media and some of the clinical literature on the hazards of divorce and remarriage, and problems in children whose parents have gone through marital transitions [a nice way to put it] is a disservice to the majority of those individuals who, often with heroic effort, are leading constructive lives...⁴⁶

This is argument through indignation. A "narrow focus" on the hazards of divorce is a *disservice*, huff, huff. Does this prove that divorce doesn't *have* hazards? No. It only moves to put us on the defensive, and to distract the debate from the real issue.

The book continues,

46. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

Happy, competent children can and do develop in all types of nurturant, well-functioning families, including divorced, single-parent, and remarried families, through the courageous, selfless, and frequently dedicated care giving of parents.⁴⁷

That's true. "Happy, competent children can and do develop in all types of nurturant, well-functioning families." The authors neglect to say, however, that the traditional two-parent family has a statistically better chance of being a nurturant, well-functioning family.

Praise is due to the parents or parent in any other family who is raising happy competent children, because such parents or parent is going against the odds. They deserve our sympathy, support, and gratitude; but that doesn't mean we should encourage other parents to enter the same circumstances.

These arguments against the exclusive ascendancy of traditional marriage have changed in tone and content over the decades because the tone and content are only expedients; they will change, as circumstances require. What does not change is the central aim of all of modernism's efforts, and that is the election of the individual as the final arbiter of all behavior and values. The individual decides what signs stand and what signs fall.

Simone de Beauvoir, who seems to have had a knack for coining pithy modernist mottos, said, "As long as the family, and the myth of the family...have not been destroyed, women will still be oppressed."

Or, consider the infinitely more droll, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." Through slogans like these, modernism urges us on toward an image of freedom and autonomy that is too rarified and gutless to work. When we actually try to build it, it collapses, too weak to stand up against

47. *Ibid.*

the gravity we live in. Sometimes that gravity makes us feel burdened, and modernism's dream of floating on air seems attractive. It's the eternal dream of escape. We would all like to be unencumbered. Our divorce culture is an attempt at being unencumbered. It's a world of women unencumbered by men, of men unencumbered by wives, of children unencumbered by the tyranny of two parents. We're out to "achieve the climate we desire." Peter Pan escapes to Never-Never Land.

But along the way, as we try to make this work, as we try to argue and cajole it into reality, as we stubbornly resist the evidence of our mistake, the slogans may reveal themselves to be not really so funny, or so hip, or so stirringly revolutionary. They may just reveal themselves as deceptive and ill-advised.

Still, the self wants what it wants. Once it has broken free of its old constraints, and has clutched the apple of its desire, it hangs on tight. It's like Gollum, the creature in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, who grips the magic ring that makes him invisible, powerful, and safe from consequences. He is unable to resist its enthrallment, and hisses "my preciousss, my precioussss," to himself and to his ring.

We shouldn't blame anyone who just got stuck. It could have been any of us. It has been many of us. In fact, our purpose should be to find a communal way out, not bash the unlucky. Nevertheless, whatever our position: lucky or unlucky, agonizing or unconcerned, if we forget or deliberately deny the nature of things, the patterns of history, personal experience, and physical reality — Pinker's list — we will be making our own luck, and it will all be bad. It will stick us. We will be like an engineer who approaches a project with delusions about the qualities of the materials available to him.

Such an engineer might try to build a skyscraper out of wood, or an airplane out of cement. His attempts at building a better world are rooted in absurdity and will only lead to further

absurdity. After repeated failures, the builder of the cement airplane will say, "If the government will only put enough money into it, it will fly next time!" Or, he may say, "This is a new kind of airplane! Who says an airplane has to fly? Why shouldn't an airplane lie on the ground, immobile? Think outside the box! Liberate yourselves from the myth of transportation!" And his, or her, supporters murmur, "What a visionary!"

Nowadays we often hear it said that our society and its people were naive and innocent before the 1960s. The implication is that now we've grown up; we have no illusions. We're made of tougher stuff. Now we're adults. This is all pretty self-congratulatory. In some ways, we're the naive ones. We're the immature ones. We're so steeped in our Rousseauian illusions that we follow them into disaster. The people of previous generations weren't so foolish. They knew what worked and what didn't. They knew which guns were loaded.

We moderns, for all our supposed savvy and eyes-wide-open approach to life, have convinced ourselves that some guns are actually musical instruments we can play beautiful melodies on. We do this because we want to live in a world of all music — no dangers that might contradict our will. We want this so badly we even accept the injuries we get when the guns go off. We see this as the price of admission to the concert. "Stand back, I feel like playing a few more stanzas."