

## Reckoning

*Like Amway or anything . . .*

IT WAS ONLY TWO MONTHS after first meeting Frank Valenti that I had to present my initial findings to our seminar at Brown. Over the past six months of field research, I had gathered the life stories of thirty-four individuals and observed the activities of groups they were involved with, including Shawmut River and the Fourniers' Holy Family Academy around Worcester, Birthright and right-to-life chapters near me in the Connecticut River Valley and most recently a group fighting sex education in the public schools of Athol, Massachusetts, a run-down mill town near the New Hampshire border.

Though the Athol group recognized their young people's needs for information about sex—especially AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases—they were pained by the values they saw embedded in the curriculum developed for their schools, especially its nonjudgmental attitude toward sex outside marriage and, even more so, the “values clarification” approach to teaching morality underpinning it. That approach, they felt, encouraged students to see values as things individuals chose from competing possibilities, rather than as unchanging givens they needed to accept. In their view, it denied the existence of moral absolutes.<sup>1</sup>

As I approached my presentation to our seminar, I decided to focus on Shawmut River to raise some of the larger issues involved. As a community enterprise, it demonstrated in a more immediately apprehensible way the sense I was making of popular support for new-right politics. At the same time, the life stories of its members resembled in

important respects those I heard from other conservatives I interviewed. As I listened to their stories and observed events in their daily lives, I began to see how new-right politics, as well as fundamentalist Christianity, easily meshed with lives so different from my own.

Virtually all the conservatives I met (with some exceptions discussed below) spent their formative years into adulthood involved in a circle of relatives and family friends on whom they relied to meet day-to-day needs. Prominent among those needs were help with child care and with the profusion of loose ends that domestic life necessarily involves. For those in wage work or small business, help also included basic economic needs like roofing a house, fixing a car or providing money to meet household expenses. For those better off—like the family of a local banker or medical doctor—help also involved the advantages and amenities “good connections” can bring. But nothing promoted stronger bonds within these family circles than sharing the love and care of children across generations. And in all these helping and sharing relationships, reciprocity was the governing standard of conduct and the willingness “to oblige,” the prevailing ethos.

At Shawmut River itself, extended-family ties were the building blocks of church life. The Valenti-Morse clan provided the engine for founding and building this pioneer church. Furthermore, family ties provided the chain of relationships along which conversion and recruitment traveled and the backbone, the tensile strength, of its core membership. Five family groups, including the Valentis, Strongs and Keeners, made up more than half of the church membership. And those three individual families alone made up half of Wednesday night's “old-home crowd.” This pattern was similar to Jerry Falwell's church in its early days and was evident in what I casually picked up about other like-minded independent Baptist churches around the country. Not infrequently they could be found to be copastored by a father and son-in-law, or two brothers. The president of the Massachusetts chapter of the Moral Majority at the time, for example, shared the pastorate of his church with his father-in-law.

Shawmut River not only incorporated existing family ties but also gave family relationships a privileged place in its symbolic order. Members were fondly addressed as “Brother Dave” or “Aunt Margaret,” and Pastor Valenti routinely paid deference to elders in the congregation by greeting them from the pulpit on a Sunday morning or by inviting their stamp of approval on an accepted truth. “Am I

right or wrong, Granny?" he would often shoot from the pulpit to Sally Keener's grandmother in her customary pew.

Even for members without relatives in church, I was struck by how much their lives were anchored in such extended-family relationships. Most, even those without any relatives in church, were wage earners or small-business proprietors whose families were rooted in the area. If they attended college, it was usually a local college, and, while attending, they continued to live at home. The church's one educated professional at the time—apart from teachers and nurses—was a veterinarian who, after schooling at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, had returned to Worcester to set up a practice in his hometown.<sup>2</sup>

Some church members, however, were not from the Worcester area or for some other reason were now removed from daily contact with their own families of origin. They included Scott and Sue Sanderson, Aunt Margaret, two families who had immigrated from Taiwan and Northern Ireland, respectively, and Anne Sullivan, a single mother on welfare who had fled an abusive marriage in a nearby city. For these members, Shawmut River's climate fostered the formation of new family-like ties of mutual dependence like those they had been accustomed to rely on in the past.

Anne Sullivan and her three children, for example, were taken under the wing of a middle-aged couple in church whom they came to call "Granny and Grandpa Harding." The Hardings helped care for Anne's children, bought them things they needed and took the family out to dinner. At the same time, these relationships were a "blessing" to the Hardings. Though they lived right next door to their own son and daughter-in-law, a family feud had alienated them, at least for the time being, from treasured relationships with their own grandchildren.

Like the Hardings, Aunt Margaret had grown up in Worcester but had experienced a breach in her family network. She had been very close to her mother until she passed away but had had no children of her own. Most of her siblings had moved away, and after her parents and husband had died, she had few relatives to turn to. It was a niece, however, who had first brought her to Shawmut River and introduced her simply as "my Aunt Margaret."

"Very pleased to meet you, Aunt Margaret," Margaret recalled Pastor Valenti responding, and the title had stuck ever since. When her niece had stopped attending, however, Margaret had had no way to get back and forth for services.

"So Dan Keener came over," Margaret recalled with glee about Dave Keener's brother, "and said to me, 'Can I take you home, Aunt Margaret?'"

"Yeah, you can take me home. I'd *love* it. So going home, he says to me, 'I'm not going into the details, but I want to not just *call* you Aunt Margaret. I've decided I'm *adopting* you.' He let his mother and dad know," she continued, savoring every detail in the progression of their relationship, "and he brought his mother over one day, and so we were introduced. And they had me over to the house one time, too." A bachelor in his mid-thirties, Dan still lived with his parents.

Now and then Dan would give Aunt Margaret a bag of groceries or help her out in some way or other. Sally Keener remembered the time he gave her a whole bag of "goody-type things—little canned hams, special cheeses and crackers—things you wouldn't buy for yourself, only if company was coming. And she's like in her glory for two weeks," Sally recalled, smiling broadly. "She'd call him up and say, 'Guess what I'm eating tonight!'"

This was not done as charity, carrying the stigma of receiving help without giving in return. Instead, it was part of a personal relationship knit by a chain of reciprocities between Margaret and Dan—how family members were expected to act toward each other. When Dan did a short stint at Liberty Baptist College in Virginia, for instance, he rented a one-room apartment with shared bath for \$100 a month and found himself, at times, he said, with "one-quarter of a tank of gas and half a box of noodles to eat." During this period, it was Aunt Margaret who sent him a little money to help out.

"I don't know how that woman survives," Sally observed, "but she would be the first one to give somebody money." As other students of reciprocity have noted, those who depend most on help from others are often quickest to give in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Pastor Valenti referred to this creation of helping relationships within the church as "the third stage of church growth," when "people start doing things for other people." It was a feature of the church that Phil and Jean Strong first attended in Florida. The pastor and his wife didn't "counsel us," Jean said, correcting my language. "They adopted us." Through "adoptions" like those between Aunt Margaret and Dan Keener, between the Sandersons and Keeners, and Anne Sullivan and the Hardings, Shawmut River helped repair and patch up a life of mutual dependence that members were accustomed to in their own

family circles. These adoptions, or "fictive kinships" as sociologists sometimes call them, flourished in Shawmut River's villagelike atmosphere, where existing kinship ties were present and recognized, where the idiom of kinship reigned, and where the willingness to oblige and to think of "others" before "self" was seen as an absolute issuing from the very word of God.<sup>4</sup>

For their part, Dave and Sally Keener could rely on either set of their parents to help care for their children, or on Granny Gund (Sally's grandmother) and her two unmarried daughters living with her (Sally's aunts). This was part of the Keeners' ongoing round of social interaction. "I spend half my time at my relatives'," Sally told me. "We go there for supper a couple of nights a week." Sometimes Granny Gund would simply insist on taking their children for the day just to have them around.

Granny Gund was a huge woman in her early seventies who suffered from emphysema and heart ailments and wheezed uncomfortably when she walked. Her imperious manner made her known affectionately among her relatives for being able to "drive you nuts," as Sally put it. Still, Sally and Dave felt obliged to take her out shopping and on other outings. Then one day they would drop by her house, Sally reported, and Granny would say, "I just bought you a twenty-five-inch console TV," or, when she knew their car was failing, "Take my car. You drive it for a while. If I want it, I'll call you back." She beamed to report these reciprocities as if they were the fulfillment of what good living was all about.

Shawmut River invested such giving and the sacrifices it involved with sacred meaning: God wants you to give to those in need, even when it involves sacrificing self. They believed God would particularly bless the sacrificial giver, one who gives even when it hurts, and regaled one another with stories about how, after they made such sacrifices, God saw to it that their own particular needs were met through someone else's benevolence. Self-sacrifice was a virtue that gave expression to the predictable logic of life: Giving was, through reciprocity and God's almighty hand, a reliable way to meet needs and find fulfillment in life.

Dave and Sally Keener, even with their scant income, were particularly joyful givers. Sally claimed Dave was "forever giving our last five dollars" to a single mother they knew who did not have enough to eat, even though the Keeners themselves needed the money for groceries.

"Then somebody will turn around and give us a bag of groceries or a check," Sally said. "It works out that way."

Though a life of mutual dependence within a family circle was commonplace among members of Shawmut River and other new-right activists I met, it was foreign to people I knew in academia and the New Left, as well as to other educated professionals I knew. Most of us were prepared, from the moment we left home for college, to leave family dependencies behind and learn to live as self-governing individuals. This left us free to move from one city to another for graduate education or for those specialized jobs for which our training qualified us. In the process, we learned to piece together a meaningful life with new friends and colleagues alongside old ones. Our material security did not rest on a stream of daily reciprocities within a family-based circle of people known in common but rather on the progression of professional careers, with steadily increasing salaries and ample benefits to cover whatever exigencies life would bring.

These contrasting patterns of family life between my progressive friends and colleagues, on the one hand, and conservatives I met, on the other, encouraged me to consider new-right politics against the background of lives that worked quite differently from my own. If Shawmut River was busy repairing and infusing with sacred meaning a life lived through family obligations, what could be gained by looking at new-right enthusiasms as an effort to defend and strengthen such a life?

This perspective helps resolve some of the puzzles new-right politics pose to outsiders. For instance, considering Sally's readiness to give, it seemed incongruous that she was so hostile to public welfare. "I don't have any sympathy for people on welfare," she told me. "I think you should earn what you get." She felt only the disabled should qualify. Like other conservatives I spoke with, Sally objected to social programs where benefits were, as Sharon Valenti put it, "just handed over without any cost." That is, where benefits were given solely on the basis of an individual's right with no obligations attached.<sup>5</sup>

This vantage point might even help us understand the familiar charge that conservatives like Sally or Sharon frequently make: that Ted Kennedy (or some other liberal Democrat) is a "communist" and that "communism is undermining the moral fiber of American life." This was the kind of statement that might prompt us, as it did the historian Richard Hofstadter, to judge right-wing conservatives to be paranoid.<sup>6</sup>

But is it so irrational to think that people's greater reliance on government programs—the liberal Democrats' vision—might weaken their need to rely on other means to survive, like family? Is it not the expectation, as with Aunt Margaret, that you will eventually need help from others that compels people to sacrifice to help others out in the first place? Therefore, would not people's fuller dependence on a safety net of government programs threaten to dissolve some of the underpinnings of reciprocal obligation—or the “moral fiber” of American life, as such citizens experience it? Furthermore, recognizing that by “communism” many Americans mean, at least since the Bolshevik Revolution, the full-scale bureaucratization of society under a centralized state, can't we appreciate how someone like Sally Keener might see the vision of growing state welfare as a kind of “communism” bound to undermine the moral foundations of her way of life? In such ways, seeing conservative politics through the lens of life lived through family obligations governed by reciprocity helps make sense of conservative statements we might otherwise dismiss as paranoid or irrational.<sup>7</sup>

Or consider another puzzle new-right enthusiasms pose to liberals: that conservatives oppose abortion as murder yet support militarism. Liberals often see this pairing as evidence of conservatives' wanton hypocrisy or, at best, hopeless illogic. “Their so-called pro-life argument,” one scholar charged, reflecting a commonly held view, “is deeply compromised by staunch support for increased military spending and for the death penalty. It seems clear that their pro-life position is not a consistent theological or philosophical stand.”<sup>8</sup> (By the same token, conservatives I met seized upon the hypocrisy they saw in liberals' crusade to “save the whales” while championing the right to “kill babies.”)

However, seeing right to life and militarism through the lens of a life lived through reciprocities within a family circle shows how extraordinarily consistent they are, for both express family-like obligations of an ultimate kind: for men, to take up arms and even sacrifice their lives to defend women and children; and for women, to risk their lives to bear and care for children and other dependents. In these idealizations, stirring the highest passions, family obligations appear as matters *not of choice*, but of unquestionable *duty*.<sup>9</sup>

That opposition to abortion aims to uphold the broader obligation to care for dependents in the family is seen in how readily right-to-

lifers slide from one to the other in their political rhetoric. “If life isn't safe in the womb,” they would typically say, “it isn't safe in the nursing home.” Sally Keener, along with others at Shawmut River, was adamant about caring for older family members. Having worked in nursing homes, she was greatly upset to see people “dump off their relatives” there. If Granny Gund became bedridden, she said, “I would feel obligated to quit my job and take care of her. I would *never* put her in a nursing home.”

Similarly, having antiwar activists refuse to bear arms because they disapprove of a particular war, or of war in general, makes men's obligation to protect women and children a matter of choice, not unquestionable duty. (This would be so even for a war like Vietnam, which conservatives I met often saw as senseless.) From this perspective, any contradiction between opposing abortion and supporting militarism melts away. Instead, they appear as part of the same vision of what life is all about: men and women being willing to sacrifice self for the larger good in ways defined by traditional gender roles in the family. In this vision, family obligations are cast in terms of sharply differentiated gender roles felt to express essential differences between women and men. To deny these obligations or these roles—or the essentialist views of gender underpinning them—means for many conservatives the dissolution of the family and the consequent collapse of civilization as they know it.

However sensible it was to see new-right politics in these terms, supporters themselves were not apt to interpret their politics in this way. They spoke simply of defending “the family” or fighting for “traditional family values” against, for example, the “do-your-own-thing mentality” of the sixties or “antifamily” forces they saw arrayed against them. This was so, I came to believe, because they took extended-family ties so much for granted that they could not imagine life without them. When I told members of Shawmut River that I was interested to see that family groups were the building blocks of their congregation, they would say things such as “Any fundamental church would be that way.”

“It's like Amway or anything,” Sharon's stepfather, Tom Morse, replied simply. “The first thing you do is get your family involved.” So much did he consider a wider family circle the natural foundation of *anything* you might organize, including the remarkable marketing success of Amway.

The taken-for-grantedness of our own pattern of family life makes it a faulty lens through which to perceive the actions of others. The misperceptions it creates occur in both directions between conservatives and liberals in American life. When I mentioned to Sharon that some mainline Protestant churches I knew were not made up of larger family groups, she concluded that their faith must not matter that much to them. Otherwise, she assumed, they would have brought their wider families along.

And one day, several months into my fieldwork, Pastor Valenti turned abruptly to me and asked in puzzlement, "Where *do* you live out there in Northampton, anyway? You're still at home, aren't you?" He meant with my parents. Even though I had told him on more than one occasion that my parents lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he could not help but imagine that, since I was not married, I would still be "at home." In fact, as I looked around, I realized that virtually all the unmarried men and women at Shawmut River—even those, like Dan Keener, who were well into their thirties—still lived "at home."

By contrast, by the time my friends and colleagues and I married—even if just out of college—we generally had established ourselves as independent individuals removed from daily cooperation with parents and other relatives. Rather than conform to an existing moral code shared by our elders, to whom we were bound in daily cooperation, we were encouraged and needed to fashion our own moralities within an environment where diverse and unreconciled ones jostled uneasily with each other and in which perhaps the only standard we might readily share was mutual tolerance for different values. We did not choose to be moral relativists; the lives we lived, in some sense, required it.

At the same time, when professional people like us married, we were free to explore a realm of intimacy—of couple privacy—unhindered by day-to-day involvements with our families of origin. My women friends and colleagues would never have found themselves several years and two children into a marriage lamenting, "I want my mom!" as Sharon did upon moving to Lynchburg. Or, like Jean Strong, after several years of marriage, finding it necessary to learn how to talk with Phil by *interviewing* him. Similarly, no one I knew began married life living under the roof of one set of parents or the other, as many at Shawmut River did, including both the Sandersons and Keeners.

At the same time, the unrestrained privacy and greater intimacy of our marriages carried their own particular strains, including the social isolation of housewives bearing the relentless responsibilities for child care and housework. These strains fueled our criticisms of traditional gender roles in the family and prompted numerous adaptations to relieve them, including our interest in a wife's work outside the home as something good in and of itself, our explorations of communal living and our reliance on "support" or "consciousness-raising" groups to help bridge the gap between public and private. A touchstone of the feminist critique of the family in the 1960s and 1970s was that because women were socially isolated in the private sphere of family life, they were removed from the discourses and power structures of public life.

But the role of housewife and mother did not isolate the women of Shawmut River socially. Instead, it bound them in cooperative relations with women relatives—cross-generational groups in which their common identity as women was collectively fashioned. That identity emerged in a world separate from men's, in which women as well as men appeared as distinctly different creatures, as "fractions with different denominators," as Jean Strong put it. These were some of the reasons, I had argued in my doctoral dissertation, why sixties feminism, which defined itself in terms of its critique of the family, had arisen and flourished among college-educated, professional women, rather than among working-class women or women of color. Whenever extended-family ties were vital, I proposed, much of that critique might assume less relevance and be felt even to undermine women's interests.<sup>10</sup>

Day-to-day cooperation among women relatives naturally involved different households in one another's business and made it people's business to know much more about one another's affairs than I or my colleagues would tolerate. These radically different standards of privacy came home to me in a story told by Sharon's sister-in-law Judy Waters about her experience in the 1970s at Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, Jerry Falwell's alma mater and the flagship school of the Baptist Bible Fellowship. Her husband was attending classes at the time, and Judy was at home with their one child. Each week a member of the faculty would stop by their apartment for a visit, Judy recalled, sometimes unannounced, just to see that everything was all right, including their marriage and her housekeeping. Judy did not

find this inappropriate, even at a time when students at other colleges and universities across the nation were busy overthrowing the last vestiges of *in loco parentis* rules, permitting them to do almost anything they wanted to in their own private space.

These contrasting sensibilities of public and private, I came to see, were one reason why some people felt immediately "at home" when they first attended Shawmut River, even if raised in quite different churches or no church at all. Its villagelike atmosphere was simply an extension of the kind of sociability prevailing in their own family circles, within which the personal was readily aired, people stood ready to "oblige" and relationships were seen and acted upon as *given* rather than *chosen*. Members were immediately comfortable with and enjoyed the familiar, down-home atmosphere of worship at Shawmut River, where a stranger needed to be introduced, where someone openly asked for prayer for a troubled marriage, or where a pastor joked about his mother-in-law. While my colleagues and I might cringe at such violations of our own sense of privacy and propriety, members of Shawmut River saw the reserve and discretion of local mainline churches they had visited in the course of their spiritual search as "cold" and "unfriendly."<sup>11</sup>

This mirroring of misperception was something I became quite familiar with over the years. For the members of mainline Protestant churches were not, by and large, cold and unfriendly. Rather, their formality and reserve served, partly at least, to protect individuals' privacy, permitting them to *choose* rather than simply *accept* whom they might get to know. You choose friends, not family.

Misperceptions of this kind often leave people unable to truly comprehend what their opponents are saying. During a debate over sex education at an open meeting of the school board of Athol, Massachusetts, for example, a well-dressed man rose to say he had read the disputed textbook proposed for this sex education curriculum three times and did not find anything objectionable in it. It did not push *any* particular values, he said quite matter-of-factly. "It lets individuals come up with their own." It did not occur to him that seeing values as something individuals "come up with" on their own rather than *accept* as given—whether by parents, natural law or God's word—was *itself* a moral position. He was unwittingly giving expression to the very "moral relativism" conservatives around him were contesting. Such utterances were the kind Sharon Valenti had in mind when she said she

could quickly identify a secular humanist by some remark that inadvertently revealed that he or she did not believe in absolutes.

IN MY TALK TO OUR SEMINAR, I did not set forth this interpretation of new-right politics in explicit terms or unravel any of the puzzles it allowed. Instead, I limited myself to describing what a fundamentalist church like Shawmut River did for its members as a first step toward understanding why churches like it have consistently supported conservative politics of this kind.

My reluctance to present this interpretation stemmed partly from my awareness that things were not as clear cut or straightforward as this. In any case, I was not trying to explain why this or that individual was moved to new-right activism. Too many particularities of temperament, life story and historical context would necessarily be involved to reduce political action to sociological factors of this kind. Instead, I was trying to account for the broad pattern of support for conservative versus liberal politics of the family across the American class structure and American public by employing these contrasting types of family life. Why some supporters get mobilized into political action and others not, and what conservative politicians make of this base of potential support, each with his or her own purposes and values, were different matters altogether. In addition, I wanted to show how these contrasting types help us interpret the meaning of conservative pro-family politics by permitting us, for instance, to see coherence where we might otherwise see contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

But my hesitation to present this interpretation arose, in part, from the life stories of a significant minority of new-right activists I met who had *not* grown up in circles of cooperating kin but ended up living within them. The fact that these included some of the most outspoken leaders of groups I observed was even more intriguing.

Jean Strong, for example, told me that her mother, because of her mental afflictions, had cut off her family's contacts with relatives nearby. Only by retreating to work as a live-in governess in another family had Jean experienced a model of what she took to be normal family life. Eventually she became an active participant in Phil's sprawling family network and in the life of fundamentalist congregations in Florida and Massachusetts. She nevertheless remained involved with her own family, taking a divorced niece under her wing,