

# 7

## Marriage and the Family

*The family is the civilian equivalent of Marine boot camp. It is supposed to prepare people for the combats and joys of life. Let us look at it, however, in the light of the fact that one out of every three spouses checks out of his first attempt at marriage. And let us review the family in light of the hypothesis that rigid conformity to the middle-class design for marriage and family life is the prime cause of physical and psychological breakdown in our time. Many families simply are not fit for their members to live in. The hypothesis asserts that conformity to familial roles produces dispiriting, stressing untenable situations which culminate in physical illness for some and neurotic or psychotic breakdown in others. The role definitions and modes of relating designated "normal" serve more to produce a cosmetic image of family life and to maintain the status quo than they do to foster personal growth and full functioning.\**

### MORAL ISSUES IN FAMILY LIFE

Our customary values are the bases for the high regard most Americans have for marriage and the family. One *ought* to be married to one person of the opposite gender until one of the partners dies; one *should* maintain an unquestioned loyalty to blood relatives; one *ought* to parent children, if medically possible. These and other like-minded moral rules are taken for granted by most senior citizens and many others. These rules provide a basis for the morally good way to live. Members of younger generations and some seniors are questioning our nation's customary values and the morality of the rules governing family life. They are asking such questions as: Should formalized marriage and the certificate be required for a moral relationship? Why should a couple have any children? Isn't divorce often a good solution? Do I have any obligations to relatives I don't know or don't like? Isn't the quality or substance of a relationship far more important than the certified or acceptable form it takes?

In this chapter we shall consider several views on the nature of "family" and "marriage." By doing so, we shall be in a better position to answer for

\*Sidney Jourard, "Reinventing Marriage and the Family," in *The Transparent Self* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1972), pp. 103-104

ourselves these types of moral questions. (Specific matters of sexuality will be discussed in the chapter "Sexual Ethics.")

## WHAT IS A FAMILY?

In response to a political statement opposing "more power over families" by the federal government and the Supreme Court's intrusion into the family structure, the leading editorial in *The New York Times* of July 10, 1980, raised the question, "But what family are they talking about?" If we can assume that prominent editorials in nationally circulated newspapers reflect vital issues of the day, the meaning(s) of "family" is not a closed matter.

In ordinary conversation, "family" can refer to the closest biologically related persons or to Cousin Jane twice (or more) removed. We occasionally honor an old friend of our parents with aunthood or unclehood and "like one of the family" modifiers. Family members who cause public embarrassment are called "black sheep of the family" but are still considered family; "ex-family" or some equivalent has not been invoked to designate these individuals, and they are probably invited to weddings, however reluctantly, because "they're family." Such traditional views of family have strong roots in our culture. However, other interpretations have arisen not as an abstract exercise, but because people find themselves in other patterns of human relations for which they claim a legitimate use of "family." Should we reserve "family" for our customary views? Is the traditional family the only normal and moral family? Should individuals and groups forming different patterns find or create their own labels and leave "family" alone? Who are some of these innovators tampering with tradition?

**The Couple.** Married in the 1970s, Alice and Ted have no children, and no one else is living with them. They live at a great distance from any relatives, and their only contact with relatives is the exchange of holiday greetings. Without hesitation they speak of themselves as a family unit. If their future includes only the two of them, they will be a family of two as far as they are concerned. However, they are looked on as odd by many others; in fact, without children they are judged to be incomplete as a family. A *real* family, claim their critics, is no less than a traditional nuclear family with father, mother, and children. (One child barely qualifies a couple as a family; two or more suggests normality.)

**The Extended Family.** At weddings and funerals we meet the extended family. They are "the relatives" from near and far, the public embarrassments, individuals loved and cherished, persons repulsive or indifferent, all sharing a common biological linking of genealogical significance.

Some members of the extended family remain close emotionally and geographically; they are friends, too. With others there are lesser ties, though warm and congenial. Perhaps among some of them there is an irreparable feud. But social scientists view them all as extended family or tribe.

**The Single-Parent Family.** One parent has died, or a divorced parent has custody of the child(ren), or the parent raising the child(ren) has never been married; these are three examples of single-parent families. Although in each case such a group could be, say, a father with his child(ren), the classification "family" is used cautiously. In the first example, a widower and his child(ren), "family" is used readily, though with a sense of incompleteness. In the second example, however, a divorced man with his child(ren), the group is more often referred to as a "broken home." The third example (with just a hint of moral judgment), an "unmarried father with his kids," is certainly not a family. ("Bastards" would be in poor taste; "illegitimate" too Victorian!) In these three examples of a father with his child(ren), "family" is reserved for the widower and his child(ren) to express understanding approval of the widower's moral innocence. The familial category is withheld from the other two for moral reasons.

**The Blended Family.** Husbands and wives with children from previous marriages appear on the surface to be a nuclear family. Yet, qualifiers such as half-sister, step-brother, step-mother/father, *her* children, *his* children, and so on are more than legal distinctions. They remind us that this family is not quite ideal.

One of the most respectable versions of the blended family is the marriage of a widow and widower and the consequent mingling of their children. Least respected may be the group formed by the marriage of two divorced persons and the gathering of their offspring. Although the group may feel themselves very much a family, persons and groups that do not recognize the validity of a marriage of divorced individuals would hardly call such a group a family.

**Same-Sex Couples.** For the majority of citizens, this is going too far! Liberals prefer to call this type of couple "lovers"; conservatives prefer "perverts." In the case of same-sex couples, does anyone seriously use "family?" If not, why?

**Living Together.** Some of the world's greatest religious leaders lived with—that is, shared life with—a group of disciples. They "lived together" not as we use the phrase commonly today, but as a community. Convents, monasteries, celibate rectories, some schools, and helping institutions constitute communities bonded by common principles, beliefs, or tasks. Members of these communities, as do some religious congregations, refer to

themselves as families. In some cases they view these community families as being more authentic than their nuclear families. Society regards this use of "family" as acceptable poetry if the group is generally approved. When suspect or disapproved, "family" is set aside for "hippie commune," "cult," "bunch of weirdos," and other negative labels.

A man and a woman "living together" is generally tolerated in some geographical areas. "Living in sin," however, is by no means a dead phrase; it is a clear moral judgment. Many so-called liberals betray their traditional images of family and values when they defend such arrangements with comments such as "they are *like* a real family."

**THE Family.** Some political and religious sources have sounded the alarm in recent years: *the* family is falling apart. They have the traditional, nuclear family in mind. They are convinced the nuclear family is the primary backbone of the nation. Although some couples, some extended families, some single-parent families, some blended families, and some celibate communities are approved, they regard the nuclear family as the foundation of all moral variations. They view as destructive the many deviations and perversions trying to claim family status, thereby undermining the nation's moral fiber. The alleged decline and fall of ancient Rome's family life is called forth as a warning to today's citizens.

Philosophers and many others are less ready to accept the nuclear family as *the* family. Mere biology seems insufficient as the primary ingredient of a family relationship. As we look at the condition of the nuclear family, we may ask: Is it worth preserving? What has happened to family life? Are there coequal moral varieties of family instead of *the* family?

## DIAGNOSING THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY

In ancient Hebrew civilization a family or household could consist of a husband with more than one wife, concubines, children, blood relatives, slaves, and hired servants. It is curious that in the Gospels, Jesus never condemned polygamy and other family practices of the time, except for the rather harsh form of divorce then in practice.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the eighteenth century few distinctions were drawn between the goals of the community and the objectives of the American family. Often, families actually consisted of unrelated apprentices and boarders. In the nineteenth century the family became a refuge to protect its members from excesses of capitalism. From that time on the nuclear family gradually gained status as THE family in American life.<sup>2</sup> The nuclear family, though

<sup>1</sup>See C. R. Taber, "Kinship and Family" and "Marriage," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible—Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 519-524 and 573-576.

<sup>2</sup>See Virginia Tufte and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., *Changing Images of the Family* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979)

prized highly by many contemporary political and religious spokespersons, is a relatively recent development.

Current departures from the nuclear family model are legion, as implied by these estimates:

1. The divorce rate has doubled in the past ten years, but remarriage has become so frequent that divorce is viewed by some as part of a system of marital transfer. About 20 percent of all married persons have been previously divorced.
2. Single parent families are increasing. Nearly two of five children born at this time will live in such households for at least part of their childhood. Women are heading more households than ever before, about eight million in number.
3. About one and a half million heterosexual couples live together unmarried (2 percent of U.S. households).
4. Only 16 percent of all households with children are ones in which the father is the sole wage earner and the mother is a full-time homemaker; that is, the traditional nuclear family with one worker.
5. Twenty-three percent of all households are single persons living alone—by choice, widowed, or divorced—without children living with them.

### **Factors Contributing to Changes in the Nuclear Family**

**Expanding Views of Women.** Women are divided over their identities and purposes. Some believe they were born to be wives and mothers; they are willing to be wage earners only if necessary. Others are convinced that they are primarily persons who may choose various roles; the roles of wife and mother are open to them but are not required. As persons, they share equal rights in all spheres of life with persons who are male. Women who from the outset consciously choose to accept the responsibilities of maintaining a nuclear family with their husbands' understanding and support can shape and share in their families' life without trauma; their identities are not grounded in their familial responsibilities, and they are likely to have interests beyond their homes.

Women who enter nuclear family life with the belief that they were born to be wives and mothers but later reject that view for a liberated or feminist outlook invite understandable difficulties. "She's not the girl I married, and I don't like what's going on" is on the lips of many a husband who has been told to fix dinner for himself and the children on evenings her ethics course meets. Some husbands cannot adjust to their wives as coequal persons; resulting incompatibility that leads to divorce is not uncommon. In extreme cases, also leading to divorce, a newly liberated woman may run away from home; she totally rejects her passively accepted roles as spouse and mother. A real moral dilemma confronts

women who change their identities from wives/mothers during the course of their marriages. To what extent, if any, are they obligated to continue functioning in roles they assumed at the time of making the contract called marriage? Are there responsible alternatives to running away from home? When, if ever, does a woman have a moral right to walk out on her husband and children?

**Expanding Views of Men.** American men have been raised to be "providers." A man's family nurtures his identity and purpose as a provider; he may justify his long hours of striving for success by claiming, "Everything I do is for the good of my wife and kids." Such men cannot function well without a nuclear family; the absence of children or the death of the wife is not only grievable but also shattering to any personal meaning and fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>

Some men, far fewer than women, are seeking choices for themselves. Rather than the fate of provider, they are viewing themselves as persons with options. One alternative is giving work a higher priority than providing. Though they do not exclude marriage and children, such work-oriented men delight in the game of work not necessarily for the money or "for the family."<sup>4</sup> If male workaholics are family men, they will obviously assign their wives and children to a lesser place in their lives. They may choose instead to be single and create a life congenial to their priorities, more easily accomplished with today's greater tolerance of diverse lifestyles.

Men who view themselves as persons with options prior to making personal commitments have, like women, many alternatives. They may enter marriage and parenthood consciously choosing them instead of subconsciously fated to them; their fulfillment may be found within these choices. However, as with many women, a discovery of personhood after assuming family responsibilities and thereafter wanting choices poses moral dilemmas. To what extent, if any, are they obligated to continue functioning in roles assumed at the time of making the contract called marriage? Are there responsible alternatives to running away from home? When, if ever, does a man have a moral right to walk out on his wife and children?

**Changing Attitudes Toward Children.** The National Alliance for Optional Parenthood based in Washington, D.C., would have been unthinkable a few generations ago. Unless a couple could not have offspring for medical reasons, it was assumed that all marriages ought to result in descendants. "Be fruitful and multiply" (within marriage) was the unques-

<sup>3</sup>See George Gilder, *Naked Nomads* (New York: Times Books, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Male and female workaholics are defended in Marilyn Machlowitz, *Workaholics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

tioned moral norm, and it remains so today for many religious communities. Among persons with different values, children are not integral to married life and should be consciously wanted and planned for. Charges of selfishness continue to be hurled at couples who remain childless by choice, but selfishness is an inadequate explanation; it is more in the nature of an *ad hominem* attack.<sup>5</sup>

In July of 1980 the Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that 26 percent of the rental units for housing prohibit families with children; this figure is increasing. This 26 percent does not include condominium or cooperative units; however, many of these have a "no-children" policy. The pitter-patter of little feet (which is sometimes the screaming and crashing of undisciplined children) is not a pleasant reminder of future generations for many adults. Some property owners do not want to rent to nuclear families because landlords have no effective legal recourses for dealing with offensive tenants, and they believe the presence of children increases the probability of trouble for owners. In addition, some tenants want to live free from the noises of normal children. They are not antichild, they are anti-noise and, as do some landlords, they believe the chances for quiet living are greater among adults. Although discriminating against a whole class of persons (i.e., children), these landlords and seekers of quiet know of no other way to own property as safely as possible and live as serenely as possible than to exclude children.

### TOO MANY CHILDREN

Children were once the sure symbol of continuity and hope, the one certain value which brought all other values into focus. But today there is a growing ambivalence all around the world, a feeling that there are too many children, too many of the wrong kinds of children—too many affluent children, each of whom is consuming more than his or her share of irreplaceable resources, and too many poor children in poor countries where every gain their countries make is swallowed up by the sheer number of children. So children are becoming a less certain rallying point.

Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1978), p. 128.

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*Margaret Mead (1901–1979) was one of the best known anthropologists of this century. Educated at Barnard College and Columbia University,*

<sup>5</sup>See "Childless by Choice," *Newsweek*, Jan. 14, 1980, p. 96; and Nadine Brozan, "New Marriage Roles Make Men Ambivalent About Fatherhood," *New York Times*, May 30, 1980, p. B5.

*Dr. Mead held, among many others, the positions of curator emeritus of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, adjunct professor of anthropology at Columbia, and visiting professor at the University of Cincinnati's Medical College. She authored, coauthored, and edited no fewer than thirty-five books, while also being a parent.*

Even many grandparents more readily admit today that it was great to have the grandchildren visit and leave, all within a reasonable time period. Parents are more outspoken than ever before about their own eagerly awaited graduation day—when the children have all left home. In contrast, there remain those mothers who say, “Who will I play with when the children grow up and leave?” or “What will I do when they’re gone?” But more and more mothers disagree that all children are blessings from above.

**The Era of Family Violence.** A recent study has shown that the extent of family violence is far greater than the general population may have suspected.<sup>6</sup> Among the findings are these statistics:

Sixteen of every 100 couples have violent confrontations of one sort or another during a 12 month period.

About 4 of every 100 wives are seriously beaten by their husbands.

Three of every 100 children are bitten, kicked, or punched by their parents.

About one-third of all brothers and sisters attack each other severely.

Under stressful conditions, 20 of every 100 wives assault their husbands and 14 of every 100 husbands assault their wives.

Family violence has become a theme of television documentaries and dramas. One such program noted that

In the six years from 1967 to 1973, 39,521 Americans were killed in Vietnam. During those same years, 17,570 Americans died from domestic violence, the result of physical assaults on husbands or wives or children. One aspect of this violence that is increasingly coming to public attention is violence by husbands against their wives: wife beating. There are estimates that one million American women are beaten up by their husbands each year.<sup>7</sup>

Far from “Home Sweet Home,” many nuclear families are disaster areas, arenas used for punching, kicking, torture, screaming, and death.

<sup>6</sup>See Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>7</sup>“Wifebeating Update,” *The MacNeill/Lehrer Report*, December 22, 1978 (Transcript #845-4125 available from WNET/Thirteen, 356 West 58th Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10019).



Teenage suicides are increasing at an alarming rate, students in the junior high age group are very vulnerable. And, juvenile crime is reportedly on the rise. Violence as a tolerated aspect of American life has become an increasing factor contributing to the changes in the nuclear family.

## Diagnosis

A glance at the expanding views of women and men, changing attitudes toward children, and family violence does not constitute a thorough analysis of the American nuclear family. We can conclude, however, that components of family life are becoming different, attitudes are changing, and not all is well. We can safely condemn the violence, whatever its causes; however, we are also faced with placing a value on the other changes. Are all the expanding views of women and men desirable? Are changing attitudes toward children for the better?

**Options for the Future.** One moral choice open to us is to struggle for reestablishment of the nuclear family as idealized by many religious and political spokespersons. Many forces in society are pressing for a revitalization of this form of family life and a devaluation of or legislation against some of the alternatives outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

A second moral choice is the redesigning of the nuclear family. The recognition of each individual in the family unit as a unique person with fundamental equal rights and responsibilities can be accommodated within this plan. A focus on mere form (father + mother + children = family) is set aside for concentration on the quality of relationships among the living family members; form becomes subordinate to real substance. As Jourard wrote,

The criterion of a successful solution to marital and family relationship problems is not the *appearance* of the relationship, but rather the *experience of freedom, confirmation and growth* on the part of the participants. . . . The criterion of . . . success [is] not "saving the family" in its present form, but rather a richer, fuller experience of growing existence and honest relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Realistic investments and expectations in nuclear family life can replace romanticized visions. Being a spouse and parent cannot deliver utopia to individuals whose identities are as persons not roles. Going through the motions of family life, merely accomplishing a prearranged list of requirements for "success" in family life (e.g., a job with status, a secure income of  $x$  dollars, a house in a nice neighborhood, and so on) is only superficially satisfying. As an ever-changeable adventure in interpersonal love among

<sup>8</sup>Jourard, *The Transparent Self*, p. 109.

its members as persons, the nuclear family can be redesigned more realistically. As an adventure, "the family structure . . . cannot be prescribed or described in advance, only invented. It is for each couple to commence the project of reinventing their family with imagination and courage."<sup>9</sup>

The third moral choice is to legitimize the previous option as a coequal with other valuable forms of family life, such as the single-parent family and the blended family. (We do not intend to exclude additional forms, but for the moment these two will serve as sufficient examples.)

## RELATIVES: THE EXTENDED FAMILY

"Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go. . . ." On the dining room table there is a perfect turkey and everyone is smiling. At least the holiday seasons' ads and TV specials would have us believe that the realistic norm is "one big happy family." No one has died; grandmother and grandfather are there along with a discreet sprinkling of the two genders representing all ages. Aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents are alive, well, and cherish each other's company. Walt Disney and some religious communities seem to acknowledge the existence of only this ideal quality of family life.

Yet most persons experience a less than ideal family life. The *appearance* of family may be there at "family occasions," but the bonding principles may vary from relationship to relationship. More common than we'd like to admit is the presence of debit love, possessive love, solo love, martyr love, dependent love, pressures to conform, and clear competition mixed with enough civility to allow dessert to be finished without a major incident. The "thank heaven that's over with for another year" is a frequent indictment of some holiday and family occasions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the bonding principle of biology cannot enhance genuine friendship.

Of rising concern is the place of the elderly in family life. Love and respect for older people are not universal values in the United States; we now turn to the issue of abuse of elders.

### The Elderly

The deterioration of some nuclear and extended families is shown most clearly in tragic cases of abuse of the elderly. The chairman of the Select Committee on Aging of the U.S. House of Representatives summarized some committee conclusions on elder abuse in these words:

<sup>9</sup>Jourard, p. 109.

As part of the investigation, we sent questionnaires to a random sampling of police chiefs over the country.

The police chiefs, in their replies, made these points:

Elder abuse is not limited by geographical or regional boundaries; it is a major national problem.

Statistics indicate that it is increasing.

Authorities do not know about many cases of elder abuse—they go unreported out of fear of reprisal or embarrassment.

Lack of intervention, due mainly to inadequate machinery and lack of resources, results in repeated abuse of the victim.

The police chiefs gave these examples:

In California, an elderly woman's home was sold and she was divested of her holdings while she was comatose following a stroke.

In Texas, a middle-aged son who lived with his elderly mother sexually abused her on a number of occasions and drained her bank account.

In Tennessee, a nephew killed his 70-year-old uncle and his 65-year-old aunt.

In Georgia, a 27-year-old son repeatedly beat his 60-year-old mother. He was ultimately prosecuted and the mother now lives at an address she is careful to keep secret from him. . . .

There are somewhere between a half million and 2.5 million cases of elderly abuse reported annually in the United States. . . . Some authorities estimate that of elderly people living with family members, 10 percent are abused in one way or another.<sup>10</sup>

## Diagnosis and Options for the Future

All is not well with the extended family nor the nuclear family. One moral choice open to us is to value highly those holiday ads and sentimental movies and struggle to make them become real life.

Another moral choice is to rethink the extended family; is it really necessary to let biology dictate familial or pseudofamilial relationships? Perhaps there is no moral obligation to love and visit obnoxious and cruel cousin Susan who will be seen only at an occasional funeral. We might sensitively rethink how holidays could be better spent. As we examine the extended family, ought we consider the quality of life issue for the elderly—their use of leisure, their health needs, their possible places in the extended family

<sup>10</sup>Rep. Claude Pepper, "Abuse of the Elderly," *Fort Lauderdale News/Sun-Sentinel*, July 13, 1980, pp. H1-2.

and other forms of family life (e.g., with single-parent family or younger unmarried relative)? One old model may be appropriate in some situations—elderly parents living with their own children as the welcomed *normal* cycle, not as the last intruding resort before a nursing home or death. The extended family might be reclaimed and broadened with an emphasis on quality rather than structure.

## THE SINGLE PERSON AND THE FAMILY

We reported earlier in this chapter that about one of five households in this country is composed of a single person. The designation “household” is useful; it is not a lesser word than “family,” only different. We use household here because “family” denotes more than one person. An individual is not a family.

Religious and political groups exploit “family” often insensitively and superficially. In most churches and synagogues, family services and family events have been so normative that the single person has felt out of place with the congregation. Couple’s Clubs have had rude and appropriate awakenings when a death occurs in their group; should the survivor be excluded because (s)he is no longer a couple? Now jolted, the group may notice all the other single persons who have been treated as third-class oddities. Inconsistencies in religious groups are glaring: one group demands an unmarried, celibate clergy, other faiths virtually insist on the nuclear family model for their clergy. Neither considers openly and seriously the varied personal needs of individual ordained leaders. Yet even from some religious sources, a greater awareness of the single person is emerging, however slowly.

### BEING SINGLE CAN BE GOOD

There is evidence that we have oversold marriage in our society. Since it is a Good Thing, we have acted as though everybody ought to be married. We try to match up our single friends. We treat marriage as a cure for personal shortcomings. We treat single people as though they suffered from some moral defect and we often exclude them from our company.

We live at a time, however, when there is no longer any compelling reason why everyone should be married. We certainly do not need the help of every adult to sustain the population. And when we consider the difficulties inherent in contemporary marriage, we are forced to conclude that many otherwise adequate and attractive adults may simply not be cut out for the

married life. Thus we ought to accept and affirm the decision to remain single, just as we affirm the married state.

There are signs that we are beginning to make this shift. Single people are more generally accepted today than they were a generation ago. Still many married people leave their single friends out of their social lives. And churches which emphasize a family orientation often act as though single people did not exist, except perhaps for a special "young adult" group, which often serves as an informal dating bureau.

The Christian community, because it affirms and exalts the married state, has a peculiar obligation to affirm the legitimacy of staying unmarried. Churches need to open themselves to greater participation by single people, in interaction with the married, so as not to treat singleness as a form of social disease.

Earl H. Brill, *The Christian Moral Vision* (New York: Seabury, © 1979), p. 112. Reprinted by permission.

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*Earl H. Brill is an Episcopal priest whose book quoted here is part of the new "Church's Teaching Series" of his faith. A Ph.D. from American University (Washington, D.C.), Fr. Brill has served in parish ministry, college chaplaincy, and as chairman of the American studies department at the American University. He is presently director of studies at the College of Preachers and Canon of the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C.*

The attempt to exploit the nostalgic emotions about "family" is not limited to the religious sphere. The 1980 national political conventions entertained themselves and the nation with continuing appeals to "family life," insensitively ignoring the single voter, who, for example, may have just been widowed and very much alone.

Our cultural biases are evident when we examine comments about individuals single by choice (neither widowed nor divorced): "What a waste!" "What a shame!" "I wonder why (s)he's not married!" Further, our inability to pigeonhole the sexual life of all single persons is an unspoken concern of many employers, relatives, friends, and so on; some of their outrageous inquiries and assumptions are crude and repugnant to single people. If single individuals offered similar comments to their married friends and inquired or assumed things about their private sexuality, society would be aghast.

The "single" issue raises new questions about family. Is the real issue the form of family—extended, nuclear, or other forms—or is it a matter of the quality of relationships a person has? Is the rigid conformity to biology (being a relative) as important as the quality of interpersonal love in an individual's life?

We are not suggesting that an isolated, lonely individual state is wholesome or fulfilling. We are wondering whether there is a need to redefine family in terms of the quality of relationships rather than the mere form or structure or, in Jourard's words, the *appearance* versus the actual *relationships*. If we base an understanding of family on the substance of relationships rather than form alone, all of us—including single persons—may create families, perhaps based on interpersonal love instead of only pre-packaged forms. Groups such as churches and synagogues might become extended families for single and married persons alike.

## MARRIAGE AND COMPANIONSHIP

It is largely because marriage (and monogamy) is so widespread that arriving at a definition of it is so difficult. That is, the practice of marriage transcends our society and its customs, habits, legal systems, social institutions, and ways of life. Any attempt to define marriage would have to define it in terms of social institutions or practices that were necessarily present wherever marriage could occur. . . .<sup>11</sup>

To most Americans, "marriage" means the legal, public contract into which a man and a woman enter voluntarily. A civil, religious, or humanistic ceremony is the setting for validating the contract. Religious traditions consider marriage to be "til death us do part," at least as the initial intention.

In addition to conventional monogamy, other forms of marriage are developing in the United States and elsewhere. Nonexclusive monogamy (which permits sexual expressions outside the marriage relationship), child-free monogamy, contractual monogamy (with a specified agreement on duration and other matters), trial marriage, communal marriage, and polygamy, though not all recognized by law, are viewed as marriages by their participants.<sup>12</sup>

Nonmarital relationships such as "living together" by members of the

<sup>11</sup>David Palmer, "The Consolation of the Wedded," in *Philosophy and Sex*, eds. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1975), p. 179.

<sup>12</sup>See "New Forms of Marriage," the cover theme of *The Humanist* (March/April 1974); "Polyfidelity: The Kerista Village Ideal," *Psychology Today* (May 1980), pp. 42-43; and Charles Westoff, "Marriage and Fertility in the Developed Countries," *Scientific American* 239, no. 6 (December 1978), pp. 51-57.

opposite or same sex, are forming other models of companionship for which the term "marriage" is less frequently used.

The morality of each marital and nonmarital arrangement can be debated without end. In the last analysis any moral approval or disapproval will depend on "what's taken for granted" about the purpose(s) of intimate companionship. For example, it is taken for granted by many persons that the purpose of marriage is for the lifelong union between a man and a woman and for the procreation of children and that such a marriage is the only good form of intimate companionship. Variations in this traditional view include approved modifications such as moral grounds for annulments and divorces, intentionally childless marriages, and so on.

Some traditional-appearing marriages are motivated by money, status, fear of loneliness, sexual security, professional and business benefits, and covers that mask an individual's real needs, desires, or exploits (e.g., the hiding of Don Juan encounters). The substances of some marriages are aggressive love, debit love, dependent love, and other types of love or "loves" in various combinations. For the benefit of those who choose interpersonal love as the norm for intimate companionship, the following questions may be asked prior to making a commitment.<sup>13</sup>

1. *Do we really enjoy each other as companions?* Some persons considering a commitment of marriage or another arrangement have not thought of each other as friends or companions. They may view each other as sexual partners, providers, caregivers, lawgivers, and/or obedient housekeepers. The relationship is more an assignment of duties than an interpersonal adventure. If one partner hopes for interpersonal love as the bonding principle but the other intends a congenial sharing of tasks, a conflict exists from the outset. Or, if their respective feelings of love are incompatible (one feels debit love, the other solo love), conflict is inevitable. Because individuals are often on their "best behavior" prior to making a commitment, these types of incompatibilities might not be evident; in some other instances people see what they want to in their beloved rather than what is really there. This question attempts to "get it all out in the open," so that the individuals themselves may have greater clarity about their hopes and intentions.

2. *Do we intend our commitment to be for a fixed duration or until death separates us?* Either alternative has consequences. The choice of a fixed term

<sup>13</sup>Many couples resist a process of premarital or precommitment counseling. They rightly do not want invasions of their personal privacy, an incompetent series of lectures on how they must live in order to be good, or a sense of having to qualify for a counselor's approval. However, an opportunity to communicate with each other on some matters, with the guidance of a prepared counselor, can expose major problems prior to the commitment or develop some awareness of areas needing future consideration.

carries with it not only a sense of open-endedness if the relationship does not work out, but also the possibility of an undercurrent of insecurity and instability, even fear by one partner of the impending termination. A term suggests that emotional investments can be turned off at a certain date. The choice of a lifelong commitment can bring about a trapped feeling and the possibility of a messy divorce if the relationship falters. On the positive side, by committing themselves to one another in a relationship intended to be permanent—for better or worse—the partners create a climate of security and stability within which they can deal with difficulties inevitable in all human relations; divorce is still an option when irreconcilable differences solidify. The intention of lifelong companionship sets a psychological tone different from one with a fixed term.

3. *What promises or vows do we actually want to make?* It is hypocritical for partners to echo beautiful words that have little or no meaning for themselves. Promises of love, honor, and fidelity for life compromise the integrity of an individual whose heart and mind do not reflect the words.

4. *As individuals and as companions, what do we want out of life?* "When we made the commitment, I didn't realize (s)he'd spend so much time working; I thought our home life would be top priority." Different or conflicting priorities provide contrasting satisfactions. What priority, if any, does a child or children have in the relationship? What about family planning? What methods of family planning can be used in good conscience? Perhaps what we want out of life is compatible, perhaps not.

5. *How open are we to each other as unique persons?* Some partners wear masks; some classify and categorize their companions in certain defined roles, as discussed in the chapter on identity. Is the commitment being made to a whole person or to a mask worn or imposed?

6. *What do we want to do separately?* Few companions are identical in their interests and friendships. Is there room in the relationship for some separateness? If one partner dies, does the whole existence of the survivor(s) crumble, too?

7. *Do we intend to change each other?* The fundamental personality of an adult is quite firm. Though some habits can be changed voluntarily and behaviors modified willingly, the intention to change a companion after making the commitment is misplaced.

8. *What dislikes have we acknowledged, discussed, and accepted in each other?* Some things about each other annoy the most devoted companions. How significant are the dislikes? Would it be a better life without him/her and these irritants? Can annoying moments be transformed into symbols of a partner's preferred presence rather than empty absence?

9. *What, if anything, are we holding back from each other that someday could be hurtful?* We are not suggesting that every negative thought, word, and



deed be confessed; some things are better left unsaid. However, if a potentially damaging event lurks in the background, it may be prudent to deal with it prior to the commitment being made.

10. *How do we resolve our differences?* By silence? (An inflaming punishment). Sulking? Getting even? Being sweet and calm all the time? Talking matters through with real feelings exposed is another alternative.

11. *What will our relationships be with our "in-laws" and our own parents?* To what extent, if at all, is it necessary to defer to the wishes of one's parents or "in-laws"? If there is to be a wedding ceremony, who is doing the major planning, the persons being married or a partner's parent(s)? In the case of illness or death of a partner's parent, what responsibilities, if any, does the son or daughter have? Is it necessary to spend a day every week or particular holidays with parents and/or in-laws? Are they free to "drop in" at your home unannounced?

12. *What are our respective attitudes toward money?* How important is money to us? Who is a spender? Who is a saver? Will there be a major conflict here? What about buying on credit, budgets, separate and/or joint savings and checking accounts?

13. *Are we established in jobs? Whether yes or no, what are the implications for our relationship regarding child care, household chores, schedules for work and leisure, and so on?*

14. *Are we interested in living in the same part of the world?* Does a partner have a hidden intention to live in California while the other yearns for his New England home town?

15. *Are our respective jobs of equal financial reward and potential? If not, how do we feel about the difference?* Can a man (or woman) be comfortable with a woman's (or man's) higher income? Can a man (or woman) accept the role of homemaker while the woman (or man) earns the living, if this arrangement develops? If partners are working and one is to be transferred by the employer, how will this dilemma be resolved?

16. *Are our educational backgrounds similar? If not, how do we feel about the difference?* Does one partner feel stupid because (s)he hasn't the formal schooling of the other? Does a companion with more formal education feel superior?

17. *Are our ages similar? If not, how do we feel about the difference?* Can we accommodate accidental or vicious remarks, such as "This must be your parent!" Or, "Cradle Robber!"

18. *Have we admitted that we will find other persons attractive, both physically and emotionally?* Do we feel something is wrong in our relationship when other persons are appealing?

19. *Is total sexual fidelity to be part of our relationship? If not, what guidelines*

*have been established?* (The chapter on sexual ethics includes a discussion of various forms of sexual intimacy).

20. *Have we talked, or will we communicate, about our individual sexual preferences and satisfactions?* (See the chapter on sexual ethics.)

21. *If we are considering a religious ceremony, what does this mean to us? Can we use the prescribed words with integrity? Are we yielding to family pressures that will force public hypocrisy on us? Do we intend any continuity with the religious tradition after the ceremony?*

These 21 questions and their subquestions can be adapted for use by any model of intimate companionship. Though participants can offer what they believe to be "correct" or ideal answers, only honest disclosures can accomplish the purpose. Whether the commitment is made by means of matrimony or verbal agreement to live together, the partners' feelings are usually involved deeply. Incompatible or unrealistic expectations and investments on anyone's part can, from the very inception, lead to mere coexistence, ongoing friction, or breach.

## DIVORCE

No matter how much effort and counseling goes into an attempt to salvage a relationship, separation is sometimes the most responsible decision. Remaining together in an irreconcilable relationship violates the norm of interpersonal love whether in a humanistic or theological context.

Christian absolutists apply words attributed to Jesus (Mark 10:2-10) such that divorce is never possible, except (in another passage) for adultery (Matthew 19:3-9). Other Christians interpret these passages to mean the type of divorce in Jesus' own time that was especially cruel to women, but not as permanent legislation against all forms of divorce and remarriage.<sup>14</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, separation or divorce is painful and perilous. For some partners, emotional trauma not unlike widowhood can ensue; for others feelings of bitterness, vindication, revenge, anger, desperation, helplessness, numbness, depression, rejection, abandonment, and so forth can combine in any mix. We still believe, however, that the alternative of "staying together for the children" or other such motives may be, in the long run, worse than the feelings and adjustments of separation or divorce. Whether a legal divorce of married companions or the permanent separation of committed partners living together, the emotional content can be the same for adults and children.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>See C. R. Taber, "Divorce," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary volume* pp. 244-245; and Hugh MonteFiore, "Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage," in a Commission Report, *Marriage, Divorce and the Church* (London: SPCK, 1971), pp. 79-95.

<sup>15</sup>See "The Children of Divorce," the cover story of *Newsweek* (February 11, 1980).

## MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY: MORAL OPTIONS

### Form and Substance

The debate over the nature of “family” and “marriage” has not arisen among classroom philosophers; it has emerged in society among citizens. The issue has come to the fore because there is a wide gulf between a moral ideal on paper and what is in practice; a growing conviction is evident that a collection of related birth certificates do not alone qualify for the category “family.” Likewise, more and more persons are certain that a marriage certificate alone does not guarantee or indicate the reality of a caring relationship. A dissatisfaction with mere conformity to form minus substance in matters of marriage and the family is a sign of integrity in the citizenry.

### Moral Options

It is our belief that marriage and the family are not dying out. Instead we are involved in an ethical upheaval over the forms that “family” and “marriage” may take with moral approval. Previously unthinkable questions related to form and substance are being asked such as, “Should people be required to obtain a license to parent children?”<sup>16</sup> These questions and those introduced and posed throughout this chapter are not raised to shock us, but to focus on concerns of *quality in our relationships*. This is the heart of the moral matter.

The authors of an MIT-Harvard report, “The Nation’s Families: 1960–1990,” warn against a public policy that clings to romantic images of the American family as it was formed during the immediate post-World War II period when individuals married quickly and had large families. Instead, diversity is predicted. In 1977 Vice-President Walter F. Mondale wrote, “This administration understands that we are a diverse and pluralistic nation, that there is no single, ideal model of family, and that government must not try to impose one.”<sup>17</sup>

Our toleration as a nation of diverse values and moral norms will set the boundaries on approved forms and substances of marriage and the family. Even the selection of one standard, such as interpersonal love, in theological or secular perspectives, broadens the forms intimate companionships and relationships may assume with moral approval. Marriage and the family may indeed be in a painful condition. But is it the pain of a cruel death due to rigid customary values, a moral decay? Or is it the pangs of a new birth—a wider vision of authentic human relationships?

<sup>16</sup>See Hugh Lafollette, “Licensing Parents,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 9 no. 2 (Winter 1980), pp. 182–197.

<sup>17</sup>Walter F. Mondale, “The Family in Trouble,” *Psychology Today* (May 1977), p. 39.

**CHAPTER REVIEW**

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**A. Moral issues in family life**

1. Customary values of family life continue to provide norms for the morally good way to live for many persons.
2. Customary values, however, are being questioned by a significant number of citizens.
3. Issues opened for discussion include legalized marriage, parenting, obligations to relatives, form and substance in relationships, and so on.

**B. What is a family?**

1. The meaning of "family" is not a closed matter.
2. Should "family" be used for the couple, the extended family, the single-parent family, the blended family, same-sex couples, a man and woman living together, as well as the traditional nuclear family?
3. Some sources believe *THE* family is falling apart.

**C. Diagnosing the American nuclear family**

1. The nuclear family is a relatively recent development.
2. Expanding views of women and men have contributed to dramatic changes in family life.
3. Changing attitudes toward children are also contributing to changes in family life.
4. Family violence is far greater than previously suspected.
5. Options for the future include the reestablishment of the idealized nuclear family, redesign the nuclear family, or expand legitimate understandings of "family."

**D. Relatives: The extended family**

1. The *appearance* of the ideal extended family may be evident at "family occasions," but the bonding principle may be other than interpersonal love.
2. The elderly are subject to unsuspected abuse in the United States.
3. All is not well with the extended family as well as the nuclear family.
4. Options for the future include efforts to establish the idealized extended family or rethinking the extended family (including the elderly) in terms of quality rather than mere structure.

**E. The single person and the family**

1. Although a single person is not a family, a need remains to incorporate the single state as a wholesome, legitimate option.

**F. Marriage and companionship**

1. The very nature of "marriage" is not a closed matter; varying views of relationships labeled "marriage" exist in fact.
2. The morality of each marital and nonmarital arrangement is an issue, as is the purpose(s) of intimate companionship.
3. Before making a commitment based on interpersonal love, a couple may benefit from exploring certain aspects of their relationship.

**G. Divorce**

1. Separation may be the most responsible decision when a relationship cannot be salvaged.
2. Prohibitions on divorce among Christians are rooted in a particular interpretation of the New Testament.

**H. Marriage and the family: Moral options**

1. A dissatisfaction with mere conformity to *form* minus *substance* in matters of marriage and the family is a sign of integrity in the citizenry.
2. Marriage and the family are not dying out; we are instead involved in a moral upheaval over the forms families and marriages may take.

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**SUGGESTED READINGS**

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