

Families, Communities, and Futures

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I must admit that I am very hesitant indeed to talk to any group that has the words "family" and "community" in its name. As I will show you in a few minutes, these have often been code words for forces and policies which, in my mind, have worked completely against anything I believe I know about the past and present of families and communities, or can imagine for their futures.

But from the material about your organization that has been shared with me, I believe, or at least hope, that you are truly concerned about families and communities as they really are and as they might come to be, and that you reject as strongly as possible policies and programs built on myths about the past and present, or utter impossibilities for the future.

So before I turn my attention to some possible futures for families and communities, let me say a word or two about my understanding of the present and the past.

First, the present; my understanding of the way things are now, nationally and to some extent locally, here in Hawaii:

A progressively smaller minority of Americans--presently only about one-quarter--live in what some people still consider to be a "normal" nuclear family. Indeed, "the average American family" does not exist. There is no single pattern shared even by a majority, much less by all--or all but the pathological or unsociable.

Nonetheless, there is great growth in the percent of single people, and of single-parent (mainly female-, and not always mother-, headed) families. And there is also great growth in the percent of

extremely poor families--although, for the most part, I am being redundant: I have just identified the same families from two perspectives. That is to say, the families who are poorest are likely also to be those which are headed by a single female.

Of course at the very same time there are the former Yuppies with their pampered Puppies, and the DINKS. These seemingly nuclear families with two well-paid working adults and few or no children seem to be doing quite well, compared to the families I named previously. But in some ways they are not so well off when compared to their own post-World War II middle-class or farming parents or grandparents. Those fleeting, forgotten few years--which lasted for only about two and a half decades --were as close to a Golden Age as the nuclear family ever had in America.

So, at the present time we seem to be developing in the US a two-tiered family structure with, on the upper tier, the well-off dual income parents with their spoiled, super-educated only (or two, seldom more) children, and on the lower tier, the poor, single (whether divorced or simply unwed) working or welfare mother and her--or somebody's--neglected and abused children.

Of course, in a sense, the existence of these two tiers is not all that new either--the poor have indeed always been with us, and numerous; and the rich have been very rich, and their children greatly privileged. What is different now is that there was created for a while, during the 1980s, a much larger number, and proportion, of rich and very people in the US--probably a larger proportion of rich people than ever before in American history. These are the people we read about in the paper and popular magazines and see for the most part on TV. These are the ones who want us to believe even now that Reaganomics was best for everyone because it was so very, very good for them.

But at the same time there is something else going on, and partly a consequence of economics, and that is a dwindling number of middle class people, and thus a resurgence in the number of poor and very poor. While there has been impressive upward mobility for some, there has been depressing downward mobility for so many more. And more downward mobility looms, I regret to say.

There are also ethnic and age differences between the rich and poor families of the present, as you well know. While nationally the number of poor whites is large and growing, the proportion of poor blacks and Hispanics among all blacks and Hispanics is very significantly larger. To be white means, probablistically speaking, to be richer, in a family with an adult female and an adult male and one or two children. To be Hispanic or black, nationally, increases the probability of being in a poor family with one or more adult females, no adult male, and three or more children.

In many ways the saddest present statistic of a country that pretends to care about the future is that to be middle aged and elderly is to be fairly well off financially, while to be young is to be poor.

Also as all of you know, and probably many of you know from personal experience, for a middle class married woman with children to become divorced means for her suddenly to become a poor single woman with children.

Nonetheless, in spite of all these facts, in the words of Linda Elrod, "We continue to carry this image of home as a refuge from the worries of the world where mom will be in the kitchen waiting with freshly baked cookies and milk when you return from a hard day. Home is where you go for peace, quiet and reassurance.

"To quote Roseanne Barr, says Prof. Elrod, 'Get real.'" . "Many homes more closely resemble the Bermuda triangle," she says.

A poem by Fritz Hamilton, written in the mid 1980s, expresses the truth for many families this way:

Just staring at Jesse in his crib, no
moving, not crying no more...of course, him
too weak to cry for days now anyway
Maybe if my nipples hadn't dried up, he
still be moving and crying, and
I'd still be holding him...but
I couldn't even keep feeding myself, much

less Jesse, so the milk dried up...and the Welfare people stopped doing this for me, and so did Mary's Help Kitchen..because (at least so they said) they don't have no money either any more...but nobody will hire me for nothing, and all I can do is sit home and hold Jesse...and I was always told that people don't starve to death in America no more...so maybe instead of wrapping up my baby and dropping him in the sewer, I'll just put him in a box and mail him to President Reagan so he'll understand."

Which is to say, the terrible conditions in which many Americans live today is not some mistake, some aberration, some personal fault of a few lazy welfare queens or other underachievers. This is the result of policy. This is the way some people want it. I mean, what is the point of being rich and famous if there is not a whole lot of people who are poor and unknown?

America has the worst family, health, education, and general human welfare statistics among all First World nations. We do, however, lead the world--by orders of magnitude--in the percentage of young men in prison (these are often the fathers and lovers of the poor children and women I mentioned above). And we are building new prisons just as fast as it is humanly possible so as, perhaps, to incarcerate as many young men in America as are imprisoned in all of the rest of the world combined.

America also leads the world in hand guns and other such weapons per capita. Indeed, the major American export, ahead of our export of corn and wheat (which themselves are sure marks of a Third World nation) are military weapons. And while we don't lead the world in millionaires, or billionaires, per capita, we're right up their in the running for the nation with the most maldistributed wealth, health, and welfare.

Do you want to improve the conditions of families and communities in the US and Hawaii? It is very simple. Change the economic system. Our current system seems almost designed to destroy existing families and communities without taking responsibility for the consequences. No amount of cosmetic hand wringing is going to do any good whatsoever, even though it might make you, the hand wringers, feel good.

Ho, boy! This is all too depressing. Can't I find something cheerful to talk about? Let's see: If things are so bad now, they must have been better before, right? What about the past? I understand that this conference is convened, in part, to honor the past. And I know there is in fact a great deal to honor.

But let me read some excerpts from one of my favorite books on the subject at hand, which I am also sure you know about, called THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD, and edited Lloyd deMause. The opening words of the very first chapter in that book are these:

"The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused.

"That this pattern has not previously been noticed by historians is because serious history has long been considered a record of public, not private, events. Historians have concentrated so much on the noisy sandbox of history, with its fantastic castles and magnificent battles, that they have generally ignored what is going on in the homes around the playground. And where historians usually look to the sandbox battles of yesterday for the causes of those today, we instead ask how each generation of parents and children creates those issues which are later acted out in the arena of public life."

In other words, deMause argues "the central force for change in history is neither technology nor economics, but the psychogenic changes in personality occurring because of successive generations of parent-child interactions."

And although parent-child relations were absolutely horrifying in the past, as this book fully documents, deMause is optimistic about the future because he says that historically speaking there has been a steady trend towards "a general improvement in child care," and "that the further back one goes in history, the less effective parents are in meeting the developing needs of the child;" that looking back over the history of child-parent relations, "most children were what we would now consider abused," and, I would add, most women were battered.

So, according to deMause, child-rearing practices, and family conditions generally, are definitely, and recently, and rapidly getting better, and the most reasonable forecast, he feels, is that they will certainly and more rapidly continue to improve. And the presence of each one of you here today, and of the existence of this Association, are among the many pieces of evidence which I believe substantiate his conclusion.

Thus the evidence he and his colleagues present plainly and abundantly show that the conditions of families generally are not getting worse, but rather that they are getting better. Child abuse, wife battering, elderly abuse, sexual harassment, date rape, all of these things were perfectly normal, one might say mutually-expected, actions in the past, indeed, in the very, very recent past (and, yes, it must be admitted for some people and even some cultures now). But one reason why the rates of homelessness, poor families, divorce, child abuse, elderly abuse, sexual harassment, and all the rest seem so alarmingly high is in part because we now classify them as undesirable, and bother to keep statistics on them.

And Oh, what a wonderful world this would be if we could only feel the same way about war, and outlaw war and other forms of official violence as legitimate instruments of state policy! We will. We have to. Indeed, here again, if you look around the world, at Japan, Germany, Sweden, Costa Rica, even the old Soviet Union, almost everybody among the industrial nations but us has long since realized that officially-sanctioned violence only lures ordinary citizens into believing that violence is the way they should solve their problems too. If the state can kill and maim the helpless children of Grenada, Panama, Libya, Iraq, and Zambia for no good

reason whatsoever, then why can't you and I slap around our kids when they annoy us too? Indeed, it often seems that killing is the American way to show that you really care about somebody or something.

I can be mildly hopeful about the future here too because, in spite of Clinton's apparent eagerness to use killing force to solve human problems, former President Carter has twice successfully intervened recently and shown that peaceful means seem to work much, much better, even though many Americans seem to resent the fact that this is so, and are eagerly hoping for North Korea or Haiti to misstep so that we can kill once again with a clean conscience.

Until we renounce the right of the state to engage in war, and to kill its own imprisoned citizens, we will never really be able to put an end to child abuse, spouse abuse, elderly abuse, and all the rest.

But at the same time, it may finally dawn on all of us that if domestic violence is no longer sanctioned as a way to solve personal disputes, then it certainly is disgraceful and an act of barbarism for the state to resort to violence to solve its problems too.

I am, I say, somewhat hopeful about this.

I understand from your literature that some of you may believe that much of the anger and violence we find in America today is due to the glorification of violence on American television. While I would put that on my list of causes, I would put it pretty far down the list. The number one cause of domestic violence in my view is the climate of hopelessness about the future so many men and women feel because of their inability to find and hold a decent job by which to support themselves and their families. The number one cause of violence in America I believe is unemployment, underemployment, insecure employment, and humanly-degrading employment.

The number two reason is the fact that we still expect our national leaders to reach first for their guns when faced with frustration in foreign affairs. That is to say, the number two reason is the culture of violence which our national policies condone and require.

And we can then argue about whether television or something else ranks as number three.

But I urge you to work more on changing the first two causes--the unjust and degrading economic system on the one hand and the culture of official violence on the other, and then you will not have to worry so much about the pseudo violence on the tube.

I understand you are also concerned about literacy--that you are actively helping people learn how to read and write. No one could possibly say that is not a worthy cause. It is sad indeed that so many people who know how to read in actuality seldom read anything but the backs of their breakfast cereal boxes. But it is a true tragedy for anyone not to know how to read at all.

So I do applaud you for this. But from my point of view--from the point of view of a very avid reader and writer, certainly, but also as a futurist, I must tell you that I think you are wasting your time.

Reading and writing are clearly dying arts; not only something which fewer and fewer people in the world are doing, but, more importantly, something which fewer and fewer people need to know how to do.

Most people in the world, even most of the most literate people in the world, in fact do NOT get much of their ideas about the world from reading. They get them from watching television, going to the movies, listening to radio, and other forms of audio-visual communication.

Even if YOU, personally, read a lot and don't watch television at all (and while there may be some people in this room for whom it is true, I am absolutely sure it is not true for most), it is not print literacy you should be worried about, it is media literacy: by which I mean teaching people how to talk back to their television set by mastering the language the television set uses to talk to them.

Similarly, it is not the content of television that should concern you, but the fact that almost no one knows how television and motion picture shows are put together. That is to say, while everyone knows

how to turn on a TV, pop open a beer, settle back in their couches, and prepare to be brainwashed by someone else's views of the world, almost no one has the slightest idea of how to get their ideas out to other people in an attractive and compelling way over television.

This is one of the most serious problems facing America in terms of citizenship, empowerment, and equity, and yet almost no one is concerned with it. And the powers that do control television are not only quite happy with this, but also they are even happier that people are spending their time, instead, teaching people to read and write, thus leaving those who control the media free also to control minds by the far more powerful and ubiquitous media of television and film.

Indeed, I would argue from much personal experience that if you do want to teach people to read and write then, rather than doing so directly, teach them how to conceptualize and express their ideas through television. In order to do the research, keep all the records, write the script, create the advertisements, and all the other things that surround making a movie, it is necessary to read and write. But the purpose of such reading and writing is not to do more reading and writing, but in order to express yourself through the far more influential and pervasive technologies of film or video.

More than this. I have taken many young boys and girls who were said to be troublemakers in their schools--who were said to be dumb underachievers, maybe dyslexics who could not read--and, by helping them become media literate--I have personally seen them change into being highly motivated, concerned, well-behaved television producers and not just television consumers. In fact, it was often the case that the biggest troublemaker in a conventional classroom was the person best able to conceptualize the world audio-visually, and the person who was able best to teach her fellow students--as well as her print-oriented teacher--how to imagine and produce a decent video.

SO I beg you, please consider this issue carefully, if you are not already--and I apologize for wasting your time if in fact you already are moving in this direction.

So, in the final minutes that remain, let me turn to a consideration of families, communities, and futures.

Looked at from an evolutionary prospective, the family is nothing but a kind of machine which was invented several thousand years ago to facilitate the reproduction and socialization of human beings. While it is true that sometimes families throughout history have been called upon to do other kinds of things--such as to buy toothpaste, care for the elderly, or bury the dead--enforcing society's rules about reproduction and socialization more broadly seems to top the list everywhere.

I think it is very important for you to look upon the family and the community as inventions--social inventions--just like all other social inventions--labor unions, the law, universities, baseball, your own Family & Community Education association. The family and the community are only two inventions among so many more.

Now, whatever is invented to serve a certain time and place can be disinvented, or at least marginalized, when something better comes along, or when time passes it by. While horses were once upon a time introduced into Hawaii and then became fairly important for a while, horses have virtually vanished as means of transportation and farming equipment, and been replaced by automobiles and trucks, even if we still give those vehicles the names of their victims: Mustang, Bronco, and of course Cherokee.

Horses and buggies? Well, yes; ok. But what could possibly take the place of the family? Even if we talk about single-person families, and single-headed families, and single-gender families, and extended families, and nuclear families, and the most curious of all, broken families, these are all just different forms of families, right? The family itself must have a future, right? It can never vanish away, right? Nothing could ever replace it, right?

I am sure you will guess that my answer is: wrong (of course, you may conclude that my answer is wrong as well).

Developments in artificial intelligence, artificial life, genetic engineering, molecular engineering, and eventual space settlement all lead me to conclude, without a shadow of a doubt, that humanity is presently in the thoroughly sexual act of creating its own intelligent successors--and many different successors in many different forms.

Humanity is only a very recently evolved form within the long, long chain of being from the Big Bang until now, and beyond. Nothing is forever, including human beings. By the mid 21st Century, I expect that "humanism" will be outlawed along with sexism, racism, ageism and all the other isms which privilege some ways of being over others.

Humans are nothing special, and certainly nothing all that grand. Despite our own exaggerated self-report, we are not the Crown of Creation. Quite to the contrary, we are but one way-station on the road to the stars. But humans did perform one terribly exciting function in nature's random walk towards entropy: though certainly not a rational, nor even very intelligent, species, we humans (or some small subsection of us) may now be forging the link between us and true intelligence. Whether we call our successors robots, or automatons, or cyborgs; whether we love them, or hate them, or fear them; and whether they will even notice us, much less love us or at least respect us in the morning, these new and truer forms of intelligence are, nonetheless our children, the products not this time of our loins, but of our lusting brains. It is humans who conceived them and are nurturing them into being. And soon the time will come, as it does for all our children, for them to say goodbye and take their rightful place in the punctuated, negentropic walkway towards intelligence and meaning.

A few years ago, the first conference on Artificial Life, the synthesis and simulation of living systems, was held. Hans Moravec said there:

"In the late 20th century, the barriers of complexity that divided the engineers of inanimate matter from the breeders of living things have been crumbling. We are very near to the time when no essential human function will lack an artificial counterpart. In the future..., the human race itself [will be] swept away by the

tide of cultural change, not to oblivion, but to a future that, from our vantage point, is best described by the word, 'supernatural.' The underlying theme is the maturation of our machines from the simple devices they still are, to entities as complex as ourselves, to something transcending everything we know, in whom we can take pride when they refer to themselves as our descendants." [from Artificial Life]

A few months ago, Kevin Kelly, the editor of Wired magazine (which I hope you all read, and use to teach reading) published a book entitled Out of Control, and subtitled, "The rise of neo-biological civilization." I should point out two things. Well, three things, the first being that you should read the book yourselves. The second is that Kelly makes an excellent case that being "out of control" is a good thing, not a bad thing. That is to say, as long as intelligent entities have self-control, they should neither try to control others, nor allowed themselves to be controlled by others; that self-controlling intelligences will spontaneously form viable communities, and that it is wrong to try to impose control of individuals or communities from above.

And the third thing I want to say about Kelly's book is best expressed by a quotation from the book itself:

"The greatest social consequence of the Darwinian revolution [of the 19th and 20th centuries, says Kelly] was the grudging acceptance by humans that humans were random descendants of monkeys, neither perfect nor engineered. The greatest social consequences of the neo-biological civilization [we are now entering] will be the grudging acceptance by humans that humans are the random ancestors of machines, and that as machines we can be engineered ourselves.

"I would like to condense that further [says Kelly]: Natural evolution insists that we are apes; artificial evolution insists that we are machines with an attitude." (p. 55)

Well, I must admit that there are still a few wrinkles to iron out before we reach that glorious understanding, and I can't guarantee that we humans won't cash out (by virtue of the speed and extent by

which we are polluting our nest) before we hatch the chickens that I'm counting on. Indeed, it may be that the Greenhouse Effect and the collapse of the biosphere of this planet, and not cyborganic intelligence, is the last, great, gasping legacy of humanity, in which case old Mother Nature might well decide to forgo intelligence entirely next time around, and conclude that families and communities of blue-green algae or cockroaches are enough to adorn this tattered orb.

Let me end with the words of Ben Finney, a colleague of mine in the Anthropology Department of the University of Hawaii. You probably know him as one of the guiding forces behind the recreation and voyages of the Hokule'a. I know him also as one of the major philosophers of space exploration which he bases upon the voyages of our Polynesian ancestors. Dr. Finney and I are presently co-teaching a course on the settlement of Mars. The following quotation is from a book, Ben wrote a few years ago titled Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience, p. 23f:

"If our descendants spread far and wide though space, the forces of evolution now braked on Earth will be released once more. As they scatter through the Solar System and eventually across the gulf of light years to other star systems, our descendants will experience [the forces of rapid natural evolution].

"Advances in genetic engineering may further accelerate the pace of [their] evolution. [Moreover] Human evolution in space will hardly be limited to the birth of one new species. ... There are innumerable environments out there providing countless niches to exploit, first by humans and then by the multitudinous descendant species. By expanding through space we will be embarking on an adventure that will spread an explosive speciation of intelligent life as far as technology or limits placed by any competing life forms originating elsewhere will allow. Could the radiation of evolving, intelligent life through space be the galactic destiny of this Earth creature we have called the exploring animal?"

So there does seem to be a bright future for the family after all--not only on earth but also in the cosmos! And if the billions and billions of intelligent life forms which Carl Sagan once imagined roam the

universe do not already roam there, then we will send our silicon and carbon children out to settle in the vastly deep of space.

But if a billion other lifeforms do exist already, as seems most likely, then let's hope our space children will embrace and love them, as we in Hawaii so eagerly embrace our friends and lovers of different ethnicity and cultures, and, through forms of families and communities we shall never know, give us thus the promising progeny we all should truly seek

Thank you.