

## CAN FAMILIES HAVE A FUTURE IN AMERICA?

For the New Mexico Home Economics Association  
Annual Meeting & Futures Conference  
April 3, 1992

Jim Dator

Please note the title that I've given my little talk. I am not trying to answer the question, "What is the future of the family in America?" but rather "Can families have a future in America?" I am not sure that they can--and I don't mean whether the mythic, so-called "nuclear" or "normal" family can survive, the one composed of a sober, hardworking, more than adequately breadwinning father; a dutiful, ever-at-home, ever-loving mother; and their (and only their) 2.3 radiant, obedient, healthy children. This kind of a family is truly a myth, a kind of ideal, or abstract standard, that actually existed for a small number of people in one part of the world for an historical eye-blink. By no stretch of the imagination--or at least of my imagination--can this kind of a family be viewed as "normal" if we mean either an historical norm or a norm across cultures. The nuclear family is a rare bird indeed.

But it is more than just rare. It arguably makes you sick. If you remember, Freud (and many others) made it clear that it was the pathological nuclear family that was responsible for civilization and its discontents. Many of the mental illnesses of modern times have their roots in the stresses and strains of the abnormal demands placed on everyone forced to try to live up to the role expectations of mother/wives, fathers/husbands, or children/siblings of the "normal" nuclear family. It is sad indeed that so many lives have been warped or ruined by the temptations and empty loneliness of isolated nuclear families, whether on the frontier, in small towns, or the kitchens and dens of suburbia USA.

Nonetheless, I find it particularly disgusting to live in a country which officially wails so loudly about "family values" and yet which does absolutely nothing to further any of the values of the families I know, but rather to the contrary which does a very great deal to destroy families of all sorts in the pursuit of values--basically economic values--that make my skin crawl. And the weirdest thing about all this is that this neglect and destruction of families is often done by people who say that they are "conservatives." But what they are "conserving," other than their own greed and privileged position, is beyond my ability to understand.

But enough of this! Or rather, more of this later (I must warn you). But first, let me acknowledge that (if I understand correctly who you are) there is not one person in this room who needs me to tell you anything about the past, present, or future conditions of families. You are the experts on this, not me. You have been, are, and will be in the trenches fighting the forces attacking families, and cleaning up the gore and debris which result from the carnage. You should tell ME what is happening, and why, and I hope you will do that when I finally stop yapping. But I was asked to burden you with my fantasies by your erstwhile friend Mary Ellen McKay, and I, like you, always try to do as I've been told.

So, let's start with an overview of the present--reminding you for sure of things you know exceedingly well.

A progressively smaller minority of Americans--presently only about one-quarter--live in the "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 just named. 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--about two decades and a half--were as close to a Golden Age as the nuclear family ever had in America.

But now, in a sense we are developing in the US a two-tiered family structure with, on the upper tier, the well-off dual income parents with their pampered, 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. 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 there is a much larger number, and proportion of very rich people in the US--probably a larger proportion of rich people than ever before. 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 that Reaganomics was a best for everyone because it was so very, very good for them, so far. But at the same time there is something else new, 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 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 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 older is to be fairly well off, 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.

In the words of Linda Elrod, in an article which Mary Ellen McKay sent to me, "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, 'Get real,'" says Prof. Elrod. "Many homes more closely resemble the Bermuda triangle," she says.

A poem by Fritz Hamilton, written in the mid 1980s, expresses it 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 poor children and women I mentioned above). We also lead the world in hand guns and other such weapons per capita. And the major American export, ahead 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.

Ho, boy! This is too depressing for an after dinner talk. Why'd you make me do this, Mary Ellen. 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?

Well, let me read some excerpts from one of my favorite books on the subject, which I am also sure you know, THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD, 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, "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 so deMause is optimistic about the future because he says that historically speaking there has been "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.

Thus the evidence he and his colleagues present plainly and abundantly show that families conditions 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 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, 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, and Iraq for no good reason whatsoever, then why can't you and I slap around our kids when they annoy us too? It isn't fair! Indeed, killing seems to be the American way to show that you really care about something. I mean, look at the current Presidential primary races: everybody says you're a wimp, unfit for public office, if you haven't killed somebody and been decorated by the state for it.

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.

So, have I finally found a way to put a happy ending on this dismal tale?

Boy, I certainly hope so!

But some of you this morning heard me talk about five tsunamis of change sweeping towards us from the future, changes in demographics, economics, the environment, technology, culture and world politics. I urged you then, and I urge you now, to learn how, and help others learn how to surf those waves of change.

There is no way I can responsibly tell you that the mythical nuclear family is going to return once again. The only things I can tell you is that if you continue to yearn for the return of the stable, serene nuclear family as the norm for everyone's daily life--and if, as home economists, you encourage other people to expect it, prefer it, compare their actual daily lives to it, you, and (what do you call them?) your clients, are going to be mighty unhappy, and, yes, mighty sick people.

The future is NOT going to calm down. The United States is NOT going to be Number One any more. The rest of the world, with its ways and problems and preferences, is NOT going to let us just sit here on this vast wasteland, gleefully doing our own thing. White folks are NOT going to rule the future, and neither are white ways and Western Civilization. And for every white arm raised in a salute of "White Power!" there are a thousand brains inside a thousand black, yellow, and brown-skinned skulls saying, "Man, can't you count? Don't you know which way the future is sliding? Best you learn to love your neighbors as yourself, because we are going to outnumber you by a fearful amount in a few short years. There is a wide world out here wanting to get in, conceptually as well as physically. Here we come, ready or not!" brown-skinned skulls saying, "Man, can't you count? Don't you know which way the future is sliding? Best you learn to love your neighbors as yourself, because we are going to outnumber you by a fearful amount in a few short years. There is a wide world out here wanting to get in, conceptually as well as physically. Here we come, ready or not!"

I am sorely tempted to end there--and you probably hope I will--but I just can't do it. This decade and the early decades of the 21st Century are going to be the most glorious periods of human history; the moments in which we finally fulfill what might be called our destiny, our purpose, our very reason for being. But I doubt that you have come to that conclusion from what I've said so far.

And so, since I want you to depart into the enfolding comfort of this lovely evening with a smile on your face, a spring in your step, and a song in your heart, I feel I must detain you, glued to your seats, for a few minutes more.

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 or are called upon to do other kinds of things--such as to buy toothpaste or to bury the dead--enforcing societies' rules about reproduction and socialization more broadly seems to top the list everywhere.

I think it is important to look upon the family as an invention--a social invention--just like all other social inventions--labor unions, the law, universities, baseball, home economists. The family is only one--an old one, and an important one to be sure--but still only one invention among so many.

As I said earlier, what can be 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 (and buggies? I don't know) are still fairly important in this part of the world, they have virtually vanished in my part, and have (as here) been replaced by automobiles, even if we still give the automobiles, as we should, 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 (as well as that my answer is wrong).

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. Contrary to 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 lusty 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 good-bye and take their rightful place in the punctuated, negentropic walkway towards intelligence and meaning.

A few years ago, and not far from here at Los Alamos, 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 presented in this chapter, the human race

itself is 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]

I must admit that there are still a few wrinkles to iron out before we reach that glorious day, 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 not cyborganic intelligence, is the last, great, gasping legacy of humanity, in which case old Mother Nature might well decide to forgo intelligence next time around, and be content with families of blue-green algae and roaches 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, and Eric Jones, who also holds court at Los Alamos, just up the road a piece (you see, you guys are living in the very womb of the future where both the most destructive and the most creative forces ever birthed by humans were conceived and reared). This is from their book, *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 [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. Space is not a single environment but an Earthcentric residual category for everything outside our atmosphere. 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 maybe I was wrong. Maybe there can be a future for the family--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. And if the billion others do exist already (as Finney and Jones suggest), then let's hope our space children embrace and love them, and through forms of families we shall never know, give us thus the progeny we all should truly seek.