Institute for American Values

*A Letter of Ideas and Findings*
*Number 11,*
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# Propositions

Dear Reader,

Attempting to show that single fathers are pretty wonderful guys, the *New York Times* reported on Father's Day that "a growing body of recent research indicates that children raised by single fathers do at least as well as those raised by single mothers." Here is a priceless example of what Daniel Patrick Moynihan calls defining deviancy down. If we wish to view as normative what was once viewed as problematic, we must first lower our standards. Regarding the environment for optimal child development, the old standard of measurement was the two-parent home. Any family model that consistently did worse than the two-parent home with respect to child outcomes was viewed as problematic. But the new basic standard, the *Times* here suggests, is the mother-only home. As long as father-only homes are "at least" as beneficial to children as mother-only homes, there is no reason to worry about the father-only home.

The last thing we need in our national discussion on families is to have abandoned denial and romanticism about single mothers, only to replace it with denial and romanticism about single fathers. The main question we face is not whether single fathers are as good as single mothers, but whether we want to continue to fragment married-couples homes into single-parent homes of either sex.

*Carey Goldberg, "Single Dads Wage Revolution One Bedtime Story at a Time,"* New York Times, *June 17, 2001.*

**In this letter**



*This Father's Day, the stories in the national press had a curious twist. They featured almost exclusively one relatively small group of dads: single fathers.*

David Popenoe, *The Weekly Standard,* July 2/9, 2001

## Divorce Ads (Cont.)

Anne Marshall, a co-founder of WomanTrend, a marketing research firm, reports that divorced mothers emerged as "the most interesting people" in her recent focus groups for clients such as Goodmark Foods, Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories, Elizabeth Arden, and Lifetime Television. Why? Because these mothers are needy and stressed out, and "what they want are products and services that buy them some time." These goods and services include fast food and other packaged food products, financial planning services, insurance, and almost anything that could be marketed as a convenience product. John Hancock Financial services, Volvo, Volkswagen, and Hallmark Cards are among the major companies that are currently integrating divorce themes into their products and advertising. Marshall expects more companies to follow. Marketers, reports Joan Raymond Ilener in *American Demographics,* "are just beginning to think of divorcees as a cohort ripe for examination."

What should we make of this trend? The friendliest interpretation is that, in a free market economy, when human needs arise or change, companies will develop goods and services to meet those needs. Would we want it otherwise? A less friendly interpretation is that the disintegration of marriage in our society means

that the family world, the world of intimate human relationships, is being invaded and increasingly displaced by the money world, the world of instrumental relationships based on commercial values and the cash nexus. As marriage decays, marketers seek both to exploit and fill the vacuum. You're on your own, young mother, and this new product can help. Do you trust this proposition?

*Joan Raymond Ilner, "The Ex-Files,"* American Demographics*, February 2001.*

*"The divorce rate is keeping the furniture business alive."*

*A business consultant quoted in "Just Divorced, Gone Shopping,"* New York Times*, July 12, 2001.*

## More

A magazine from the publishers of *Ladies Home Journal* is called *More*. It's a lifestyle magazine whose target demographic is middle-aged women. *More*'s motto is "Life in Full Bloom." (An ad inside reads: "You're not 25 anymore. So what?") Recently I read through an issue, trying to figure out how editors in New York are trying to figure out this particular group. Based on this bit of research, I conclude that middle-aged women are deeply preoccupied with divorce.

Up front, in the Editor's Letter, Susan Crandell (age 49) muses about what it's like to be 25 today: "What does 25 feel like now? I look around at the younger women I know: They haven't married once, much less twice…" Next was a photo-essay called "Here Come the Brides," with eight photos of women and dresses, accompanied by wedding memories. Christy, age 47: "I stored my first gown at an aunt's house, and the very week my husband and I separated, she called to say that it had decomposed." Amy, age 51: "I was a baby when I married the first time, and I wore a baby's dress. The wedding lasted longer than the marriage, but I kept the dress because I love it." Mary Ellen, age 41: "Looking back, I can honestly say that the second time is better."

Next was a "life and love" advice column, in which Olivia Goldsmith, the author of *The First Wives Club*, advises a woman who is dissatisfied with her 20-year marriage: "When my marriage ended, I turned it into a best-selling novel. Being independent can be wonderful!" Next was a feature called "Up in Smoke" about…you guessed it: "Your marriage is in flames, and you don't want to be toast. Who you gonna call?" The answer is a "diva of divorce," a high-powered woman divorce lawyer. Next was a short column called "The Case for Prenups": "You choose what makes sense to the both of you — when you're favorably disposed to one another, rather than when you're at each other's throats during a divorce." (I like that "favorably disposed.")

Then came a travel piece, called "We'll always have Paris": "The last time I saw Paris, I was married to the wrong man, but we stayed in the right places." Finally, there was a feature story about Betty, age 49, and Ken, the "man who loved too much." Betty "had dated occasionally in the eight years after the breakup of her marriage, but nothing had clicked." Then she met Ken, who at first seemed handsome and wonderful — Betty quickly fell in love — but who eventually turns out to be a liar and a fraud whose favorite pastime is seducing "40-something divorcees" — women "who have everything in life but a man." Ken is a pretty awful guy who "never steals money — only hearts."

I am continually surprised at how the culture of divorce — the constant expectation, discussion, and rationalization of divorce — has penetrated virtually

every corner of our society. A real estate agent in East Hampton, Long Island, tells the *New York Times* what it's like to sell vacation homes to the rich: "They've gotten to a point where they are in their prime earning years, their kids are in college, and they need houses that are big enough to accommodate several generations and kids from multiple marriages." Later in this letter I'll mention that, from a marriage perspective, there is some encouraging *demographic* news from the 2000 Census. But we have spent decades confecting a *culture* of divorce that now seems dense and monolithic.

More, *March 2001. Blaine Harden, "Wowing Them With Excess in the Hamptons,"* New York Times, *July 18, 2000.*

*"Splitting up was what we needed, but all other decisions are based on our child."*

A mother quoted in "Singular Outlooks," *American Baby*, January 2001.

## An Ideal to Pursue

In the *Journal of Black Studies*, two scholars from Prairie View A & M University in Texas report their findings from one-hour, face-to-face interviews with a wide cross-section of African American adolescent males (age 13 to 17) living in a midwestern city. The scholars wanted to compare boys who live with their biological fathers with those who do not on a range of educational and behavioral measurements.

Of the 433 boys interviewed, 74 percent do not live with their fathers — a finding that, according to the researchers, "provides some support" for the proposition that "America has become a fatherless society." On each of the seven outcome measurements, boys living apart from their fathers had poorer outcomes than boys who were living with their fathers. On five of the measurements — being held back a year in school, skipping school or cutting classes, being suspended from school, running away from home, and getting into trouble with the police — boys without fathers were significantly worse off. For example, 42 percent of the fatherless boys had gotten into trouble with the police, compared to 29 percent of father-present boys. About 46 percent of fatherless boys had been held back in school, compared to 24 percent of father-present boys. Consequently, these scholars conclude that "keeping the biological father at home should be an ideal to pursue for African American families."

Regarding the pursuit of this ideal, there is some encouraging news from the U.S. Census Bureau. From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of African American children living in married-couple homes rose from 34.8 to 38.9 percent. The number remains distressingly low, but it also represents a significant increase in just five years and the clear cessation and even reversal of the long-term shift toward Black family fragmentation. How good is this news? At a minimum, it appears that the many self-advertised "realists" who have regularly insisted that nothing can be done to change the direction of this trend are wrong.

*H. Elaine Rodney and Robert Mupier, "Behavioral Differences Between African American Male Adolescents With Biological Fathers and Those Without Biological Fathers in the Home,"* Journal of Black Studies *30, no.1 (September 1999): 45-61. Allen Dupree and Wendell Primus,* Declining Share of Children Lived With Single Mothers in the Late 1990s *(Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 15, 2001).*

*Policymakers will have more of an impact on the lives of poor African-American children when they accept the irreversibility of the high levels of nonmarriage of their mothers as a starting point for thinking about changes in public policy.*

Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African-American Family*, 1997

## Lonelier Number

In the journal *Adolescent & Family Health,* Paula L. Antognoli-Toland seeks to explore the connections between family relationships, family structure, and adolescent loneliness. Here main findings are twofold. First, "family structure was a significant predictor" of teenage loneliness: "Adolescents in one parent and blended families were likelier to be lonely compared to teens in intact families." For example, about 59 percent of adolescents living in intact homes reported being "not lonely," compared to only 30 percent of adolescents in one-parent homes.

Second, some of the risks of loneliness associated with living in a one-parent home are "mediated" by close parent-child relationships — that is, irrespective of living arrangements, warm parent-child relationships reduce the likelihood of teen loneliness. Fair (and obvious) enough. At times Antognoli-Toland seems close to veering away from her evidence, as when she suddenly declares, apropos of nothing, that it is "not true" that living in a one-parent home is an "obstacle" to close parent-child relationships. No, not an *absolute* obstacle, but certainly an influential experience that, as her own data dramatically reveal, shifts probabilities for teenagers in a negative direction. But in the final analysis, Antognoli-Toland faces the issue squarely: "Lonely adolescents were more likely to live in one parent or blended family structures, supporting the assertion that differences in family structure may predispose individuals to deficits in relational networks." Translation: Family fragmentation tends to undermine family connectedness and weaken parent-child bonds, thus increasing the likelihood of children being lonely.

*Paula L. Antognoli-Toland, "Parent-Child Relationship, Family Structure, and Loneliness Among Adolescents,"* Adolescent & Family Health *2, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 20-26.*

## Denial

Let's discuss denial, university-style. While in Australia in 1997 at an academic consultation on fatherhood, I heard two well-known family scholars from Perth, Steve Zubrick and Sven Silburn, summarize findings from a major study of child well-being in Australia. The study, called the *Western Australian Child Health Study*, was done by Zubrick, Silburn and seven colleagues, and was conducted in cooperation with the Bureau of Statistics, the Australian equivalent of the U.S. Census Bureau. A primary purpose of the study was to estimate the relative importance of various risk factors facing Australian children.

Zubrick and Silburn's presentation was long and detailed, but neither of them said a word about the effects of family structure on outcomes for children. It was a striking omission. Australia has long been one of the world's leaders in the proportion of children living in father-absent homes. Moreover, by 1997, an impressive body of scholarly evidence from around the world was clearly suggesting that the trend of family fragmentation posed genuine risks to child well-being. So why, in their publications and other public presentations, were these scholars choosing not even to discuss the issue? Did the data from their study shed no light on the question? Or were they simply choosing not to report the data?

The latter, it turns out. Zubrick and Silburn were forthright and even cheerful in telling us about this decision. Yes, the data from the study revealed clear and worrisome correlations between family structure and child well-being. But no, they were not reporting this evidence to the public. They had their reasons. They did not want to cast aspersions on single parents. More fundamentally, they did not want to label as problematic a social trend about which, in their view, nothing could be done. Better, in their view, to focus on non-controversial, realizable goals — such as improved parenting skills for all parents and better community supports for all families — than to draw attention to facts that would only make single parents feel worse than they already do. They had concluded that publicizing the data on family structure would do more harm than good.

Let's call this approach Plan A. Its chief virtue is efficiency. When findings are unwelcome, pretend in public that the findings do not exist. No questions, no hassles. The chief drawback of this approach is arrogance. Did you miss the announcement that some university faculty now take it upon themselves to serve as national censors, privately and unilaterally deciding what the public should and should not be permitted to know about current research on major social issues?

*Sven R. Silburn and Steve R. Zubrick, et al.,* Western Australian Child Health Survey: Family and Community Health *(Perth: Australian Bureau of Statistics and TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 1996).*

## Making It Go Away

For scholars who favor the result but not the method of Plan A, there is another approach, which we can call Plan B. It has more than a few adherents. The basic strategy is first to concede the correlation between family structure and child outcomes, then perform various academic acts intended to make that correlation seem insignificant and even misleading, like a mirage in the desert. Although these re-visionings typically involve mundane mathematical procedures, academics often describe them in highly evocative terms. For example, when the "it" is how family breakdown affects children, a chosen methodological move is frequently said to "make it go away" or "make it disappear." Like something inconvenient that can be gotten rid of. Or like a killer talking about his victim. (From the first *Godfather* movie: "Oh, Pauly. You won't see him no more.")

In the U.S. family debate, Dr. Robert W. Blum, a professor of pediatrics and the director of the Center for Adolescent Health at the University of Minnesota, has recently emerged as a prominent practitioner of Plan B. In an article published late last year in the *American Journal of Public Health*, and in a companion monograph presented at the National Press Club and widely reported in the national media, Dr. Blum and his colleagues analyzed data from the federally funded National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, usually called the Add Health Survey. Their main goal was to evaluate the relative importance of various risk factors for U.S. adolescents linked to five harmful activities: involvement in weapon-related violence, early sexual intercourse, drinking, smoking, and thoughts of or attempts at suicide.

*Two years ago, a sociology professor was hissed when he addressed a sociology conference ... Peter Saunders was then the newly appointed head of research at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). His talk touched on two basic research findings — that children are better off if they are brought up by two parents rather than one and two parents are more likely to stay together if they marry than if they don't — findings Saunders says are "empirically demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt." He asked his audience to imagine themselves a baby waiting to be born, suggesting that "if you were given the choice, it would be in your interests to choose to be born to two parents who were married." At that point hissing started in the room.*

Bettina Arndt, columnist, *The Age* (Melbourne), forthcoming.

One of their main conclusions is that, in assessing risk factors, scholars and policy makers must look "beyond" family structure. Why? Blum freely concedes that living in a one-parent home measurably increases the likelihood that teenagers will experience these problems. But his statistical analyses also show that a broad demographic variable such as family structure is less accurate as a predictor of outcomes than any of several individual and social variables, such as having trouble with schoolwork, not getting along with parents, and hanging out with friends who drink, smoke, and are sexually active.

Here is how Blum explains this finding to the *Washington Post*: "Let's say I'm a physician counseling a teenager, and that teen tells me he lives in a single-parent home. What is that going to tell me about whether he smokes cigarettes or is having sex? Not much. But if that kid tells me he spends his Friday and Saturday nights with kids who drink, that's going to tell me a lot." Not only is family structure a comparatively "weak predictor" of adolescent behavior, it is also, in Blum's estimation, "not especially amenable to change." We need, Blum insists, to focus on those teen risk factors that we can actually do something about — which is why scholars and policy makers should "abandon" the issue of family structure as a useful way of understanding adolescent behavior, while simultaneously, for example, treating the issue of school failure as a major "public health problem."

Let us count the ways in which Blum's basic proposition is either trivial or silly. First, he trumpets the greater predictive power of "individual and social" variables without acknowledging that these variables themselves are partly the effects of family structure. For example, it's fine for Blum to report that lots of unsupervised "hanging out" is a risk factor for teens, but ridiculous to offer up this fact as evidence that we must move "beyond" family structure, since countless studies have found that children in one-parent homes are more likely to engage in unsupervised "hanging out." In formal terms, Blum is arguing that evidence of how a demographic variable (one-parent homes) can express itself (more teenage hanging out) constitutes a compelling reason to abandon scholarly focus on the variable itself. Very embarrassing. Blum is committing an elementary error in logic.

Here's another example of the same error. In the monograph's "Summary," just prior to demanding that we "move away from" concern with family structure, he reports this overall finding: "No protective factor cut across all health-risk behaviors. However, the one most consistently protective factor found was the presence of a positive parent-family relationship." Let's see if I've got this straight. If I am a teenager in trouble, my "family structure" — the fact that my father after the divorce moved to another state to marry another woman — is not an important factor. What's important instead is whether I have a "positive parent-family relationship." Apparently, not only do scholars interpret how I get along with my family as unconnected to my "family structure," but the vital importance of getting along with my family means that society should "move away from" any concern about family structure. Is something wrong with this picture?

Blum's second violation of basic logic is even more embarrassing than his first. He fails to distinguish a predictor of a behavior from the behavior itself. For example, Blum makes much of the fact that living in a one-parent home is less predictive of teenage drinking than "the number of best friends who drink at least

monthly." Similarly, living in a one-parent home is less predictive of teenage sexual activity than "whether they have an on-going relationship." See how this works? Blum is increasing the accuracy of the predictor by making sure that the predictor is integrally connected to what is being predicted. He is therefore clearly perpetrating a shell game. Drinking stems from…spending lots of time with friends who are drinking. Sex comes from...having a steady girlfriend. (A Blum-like insight from the first *Rocky* movie: "You hang out with yo-yo people, you get yo-yo friends. It's simple mathematics.")

Consider an analogy. I am a scholar who studies car driving, and here is the press release on my latest research: "Previous scholars have suggested that being rich is linked to the likelihood of driving a Mercedes-Benz automobile. But new statistical analyses reveal that being rich is a comparatively weak predictor of this behavior. Instead, a number of individual and social variables — such as owning a booklet called *Your Mercedes-Benz,* test-driving Mercedes-Benz cars, and regularly "hanging out" where Mercedes-Benz products are sold — are significantly more predictive of whether a person drives a Mercedes-Benz. What do these findings mean? Clearly, we should move away from a focus on comparative affluence in understanding these behaviors, especially since the distribution of wealth is not especially amenable to change."

Which brings us to the third and final reason why Blum's study is ultimately unserious. Everything — the contradictory categories, the near-tautological assertions, the heavy-handed rhetoric about going "beyond" family structure — ultimately stems from Blum's one big idea, which is that family structure is not "amenable to change," while nearly everything else is. Name any reform (except one), and Blum is ready and willing. We can fix the schools. We can raise children's self-esteem. We can reduce racial prejudice. We can foster healthier peer groups. We can even improve individual parenting skills. Indeed, we *must*, as a matter of "public health," do all of these things for our young people. But reduce divorce and unwed childbearing? Increase the proportion of children growing up in two-parent homes? Sorry, that issue is untouchable. Can't do a thing about it.

I am aware of no evidence — certainly Blum does not cite any — that would support this thesis. The proposition that positive change is possible in virtually all areas of social life, *except the area of family structure*, is little more than a naked ideological assertion — one that tells us very little about society, but a great deal about the philosophical orientation of the person making the assertion.

Recent data from the Census Bureau are relevant to this issue. Divorce rates in the U.S. have been declining modestly for some time. Rates of unwed childbearing, after three decades of steady increases, remained essentially unchanged during the last half of the 1990s. The proportion of all U.S. children living in a two-parent home stopped declining in 1995, and may, as of 2000, be modestly increasing. Importantly, the proportion of African American children living in two-parent homes has increased significantly since 1995.

These data tell us that positive change in the area of family structure is more than just possible; *it may already be occurring*. Insofar as Blum's guiding premise about the impossibility of strengthening family structure is not only unsupported, but also on the verge of being empirically disproved, his entire exercise becomes not just flawed, but pointless.

*Robert W. Blum, et al., "The Effects of Race/Ethnicity, Income, and Family Structure on Adolescent Risk Behaviors,"* American Journal of Public Health *90, no. 12 (December 2000): 1879-1884. Blum, et al.,* Protecting Teens: Beyond Race, Income, and Family Structure *(Minneapolis: Center for Adolescent Health, University of Minnesota, 2000). Laura Stepp Sessions, "New Study Questions Teen Risk Factors,"* Washington Post, *November 30, 2000. "Household and Family Characteristics: March 1998 (Update)," U.S. Bureau of the Census,* Current Population Reports, P20-515 *(Internet release date: December 11, 1998). Unpublished Census data from 1999 and 2000 obtained from the Bureau's Fertility and Family Branch.*

## Plan C

*Research simply does not support the view that single parenting is harmful to children because it prevents healthy child development. To the contrary, all that we know about families demonstrates that family form simply does not correlate with family function or developmental health.*

University of Florida Professor Nancy E. Dowd, *In Defense of Single-Parent Families*, 1997.

Several times divorced herself, Constance R. Ahrons — UCLA professor of sociology, author of *The Good Divorce*, a 2000-2001 Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and a Senior Research Scholar at the Council on Contemporary Families (see *Propositions* letter one) — is eager to pass along to others her insights into marriage. Writing recently in the *New York Times,* Dr. Ahrons observes that those "who push legislative, religious, and economic agendas that are aimed at reducing divorce, cohabitation and single-parent households by increasing marriage rates are fighting a moral crusade while neglecting the needs of children."

Say hello to Plan C. If Plan A says pretend to be blind, and Plan B says torture logic and cook numbers to taste, Plan C wins the prize for brazenness. Just put on your lab coat and say whatever you want, with reckless disregard for the facts. Does marriage matter? No. Just that simple.

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, a recent publication from the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty tells us: "In 1998, families headed by single women raising children had the highest poverty rate, close to 39 percent by our measure. The poverty rate for single individuals without children was around 15 percent. Married couples had the lowest rates, about 2.5 percent for those with no children and 6.5 percent for those with children…Because single-mother families are more than five times as likely to be poor as married-couple families, the change in family structure [since 1969] has increased poverty." Also, on the same planet, a study reported in the *American Sociological Review* finds that, among young adult males, one consequence of stable marriage is significantly more "desistence from crime."

That marriage trends directly influence trends in child and social well-being is one of the most well-established social science findings of the past 30 years. For Constance Ahrons and other practitioners of Plan C directly to state otherwise is, in terms of professional competence and integrity, no different from a tobacco company vice-president declaring that those who "push agendas" aimed at reducing cigarette smoking are fighting a "moral crusade" while ignoring "the health needs of people."

*Constance R. Ahrons,* New York Times, *letter to the editor, May 28, 2001. Maria Cancian and Deborah Reed, "Changes in family structure: Implications for poverty and related policy,"* Focus *21, no. 2 (University of Wisconsin-Madison: Institute for Research on Poverty, Fall 2000): 21-26. John H. Laub, Daniel S. Nagin, and Robert J. Sampson, "Trajectories of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process,"* American Sociological Review *63 (April 1998): 225-238.*

## Faith-Based

Responding to the charge that public reliance on "faith-based" agencies to help poor children is inherently problematic, Msgr. Kevin Sullivan of Catholic Charities writes in the *New York Times* that we need "the broadest array of faith-based and non-faith-based programs." I understand Msgr. Sullivan's point, but his formulation raises an interesting question. Is it true that some groups seeking to help the poor act on the basis of "faith," whereas others do not?

Of course it is *not* true. Most of what we do in life, we do because we believe — we have accepted on faith — what others have told us. If we tried to restrict our activities or (even more) our ideas to those areas untouched by "faith" — for example, those areas in which we had personally conducted empirically conclusive research — few of us would ever put on a pair shoes or take a drink of water, much less try out more complex procedures, such as getting married, figuring out right from wrong, or helping to reduce child poverty.

Human beings by definition are "faith-based" creatures. The important question, then, is not whether we believe, but what we believe. If the term "faith-based," currently so much in vogue, ends up reinforcing the popular but deeply flawed notion that there is a natural split between faith and reason, and that the world is divided between those who have "faith" in something and those who do not, then it may be time for an emergency meeting of the Conceptual Frameworkers Union.

Meanwhile, when it comes to helping at-risk children, if I must choose between a social service agency whose guiding value is the God-given dignity of the human person, and one whose guiding value is the latest proposition coming out of our most prestigious schools of social work, I will choose the former.

*Stephen O'Connor, "When Children Relied on Faith-Based Agencies,"* New York Times*, op-ed, May 26, 2001. Msgr. Kevin Sullivan,* New York Times*, letter to the editor, June 2, 2001.*

*Nonetheless, there are in the life of a human being many more truths which are simply believed than truths which are acquired by way of personal verification…This means that the human being - the one who seeks the truth - is also the one who lives by belief.*

John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason"), 1998.

## Faith-Based, II

John J. DiIulio, Jr., formerly a University of Pennsylvania professor and a member of this institute's Council on Civil Society, and Don Eberly, a founder of the National Fatherhood Initiative, an Institute affiliate scholar, and also a member of our Council on Civil Society, are now serving as director and deputy director, respectively, of President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. I think of them as colleagues and friends. For years they have thought deeply about civil society and, in particular, about the role of religion in U.S. public life. They have also personally embodied the ideals of citizenship — a generous and volunteering spirit, a genuine respect for other people, and an unshakable commitment to the common good — that they write about and recommend. Now they are in the White House, with a once-in-a-lifetime chance to advocate their ideas at the highest levels of the federal government.

Their main thesis is that the federal government can, in modest but meaningful ways, help local community organizations to do more to solve local problems, rebuild communal norms and institutions, and, in particular, improve outcomes for

at-risk children. They are developing four main strategies for accomplishing this goal. First, changes in the tax code designed to increase charitable giving. Second, changes in government regulations designed to allow small and religious organizations to compete more effectively for government social service grants. Third, significantly more government funding available to these local, essentially private initiatives — either direct funding, where the money goes straight to the organization, or indirect funding, where the money goes (in the form of vouchers) to eligible individuals who may choose to seek out the organization's services. And fourth, using the White House bully pulpit to encourage leaders and institutions across the country to spend and do more to strengthen civil society and help at-risk children. Currently, by far the most controversial aspects of this plan are those parts in which government funds, intended for secular purposes, such as treating drug addiction or reducing teen violence or teen pregnancy, might go directly to religious or religiously oriented ("faith-based") organizations.

*It's simply Bush-league to feed others' religious fervor as a secular purpose when we know that religion's foremost interest is in proselytizing and perpetuating itself.*

*Michael Meyers,* New York Post*, June 26, 2001*

Several thoughts on this last issue. First, it's important to establish, at the level of principle, that there is nothing illegitimate about religious people in the public square, or more specifically in this case, about religious people using public money to do public work. As DiIuilio, Eberly and 22 others of us wrote in 1998 in *A Call to Civil Society*, some U.S. policy makers seem to believe that "a modern state implies or requires a society sanitized of public religious influence, a society in which religion is forcibly reduced by law to a purely private role. We reject this idea…[and in particular hope that policy makers] will no longer stifle creative local experiments with church-provided services in poor communities, and more generally, will recognize anew the vital role that religion plays in helping people to help themselves." In the long run, challenging and ultimately changing elite opinion about the legitimacy of public religious influence will probably prove to be this initiative's most important legacy.

Second, the great danger is not that government-funded social services, much less government in general, will be taken over by people intent on establishing a state religion or fomenting intolerance. (If that threat *were* to emerge at any point in the future, I know that many people, me included, would fight it unconditionally.) The great danger here is that government funding will slowly drain all of the religion, along with everything else that is distinctive, out of these community organizations, gradually transforming them into little replicas of existing government agencies.

This transformation has already taken place in other countries. I saw it first hand in Australia. Several decades ago, for example, in the field of marriage education, the Anglicans in Melbourne were running a program called "Anglican Marriage Education and Counseling Services." The Catholics ran a program called "Focus on Marriage." Today, thanks in some measure, I was told, to the steady incentives and overall homogenizing and secularizing influence of government funding, the Anglicans run something called "Lifeworks," and the Catholics run something called "Partnerships," each of which closely resembles the other, and neither of which differs much at all from the main secular agency, which is called "Relationships Australia."

In the U.S., the "faith-based" agency that currently receives the most government funding is Catholic Charities, an organization that, with the exception of a

few local agencies, has sought mightily, and with considerable success, to embrace an essentially secular vision and government model of delivering social services. Will other U.S. religious organizations, in the process of competing for government funding, follow this path?

In light of this potential danger, and to safeguard the distinctive ways that religious organizations can contribute to the common good, I hope that President Bush's initiative will develop a fundamentally new approach to government funding of religious organizations that provide social services. A friend calls it the "black box" approach. The religious organizations are the black boxes. Government funding, allocated for secular purposes, can legitimately flow into these black boxes. The government is then responsible for rigorously measuring and evaluating the results that emerge. Are the drug addicts off drugs? Are the drop-outs back in school? Are the fathers supporting and nurturing their children? These are secular questions, to be answered empirically. At the same time, apart from guaranteeing that client participation is voluntary — that is, making sure that clients can choose from a range of programs, non-religious as well religious — the government is officially disinterested in what goes on inside the black box. If the program inside the box involves jumping, jumping is OK. If the program involves prayer, prayer is OK. No messing around with their method, no telling them what their code is. What matters is results. An organization that produces good secular results, be that organization secular or religious, is a good candidate for funding. An organization that does not, is not.

A Call to Civil Society *(New York: Institute for American Values, 1998).*

*Regarding any major societal goal, the first question should be: Can this goal be achieved by utilizing and empowering the institutions of civil society?*

*A Call to Civil Society,* 1998

## Faith-Based, III

I spend a fair amount of time around religious people, and often I feel like a fraud. They seem so strong in their faith, unlike me, the spiritual equivalent of a 98-pound weakling. Many of them are nurtured by strong communities of faith — communities which I envy, but typically from a distance. They pray. I say certain words. They seem to live the thing. I imitate someone who is living the thing. Or so it often seems to me.

Part of their strength is that they appear to be cognitively certain of what is true about God. I ultimately demur on this point, even writing plaintive letters to you (numbers 9 and 10) putting the best possible face on the argument that cognitive certainty is impossible, and that we are left finally, and only, with hope. My friend Richard Neuhaus reminds me about St. Paul's dictum that we walk by faith and not by sight, and gently offers, in wonderful Neuhausian fashion, the proposition that "hope is simply faith disposed toward the future." But these wise words notwithstanding, my lack of *sight* on this matter is constantly unsettling.

Some things, of course, are easily visible. My capacity to make sense of natural data clearly shows me that the human person is spiritually thirsty. Ducks are made to swim. Humans are hard-wired to seek transcendence. Seeking the answer to what it means to live and die, and longing for a home beyond this home, is what we humans ultimately do. It's our most characteristic trait as a species. While this aspect of our personhood is regularly ignored and even denied today, doing

so strikes me as self-evidently erroneous — little different as an empirical matter from supposing that humans are born without arms and legs.

So far, so good. But then, at the crucial moment, vision fails. (Or at least *my* vision fails.) What is the specific answer to the great question? Where is the home that is longed for? For whom am I looking? I have been taught, and I seek to embrace, the Christian answer to these questions. But as a weak-sighted person, living often in the dark, I hope for, but cannot see, that answer.

And so my friend Kevin Hasson said to me, read the Bible story of the Prodigal Son. You remember. After a hard period of living on his own, and badly, in a "far land," the chastened son wants to return to his father's house, and is even willing to accept his father's judgment, which the son seems to believe will be harsh. He sets out on the long journey, walking toward home. But "when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

Quite a moment. It turns out that the son did not need such wonderful vision, after all. He was still a great way off, but *his father saw him*. The son did not have to locate the father accurately, get the destination clearly in sight, discern the correct answer. The son only had to walk toward home. The rest was a gift — not anything that the son figured out, but something that was figured out for him, and that was better than he had imagined. The son was short-sighted, but he was loved anyway. He was not able to run to the answer, so the answer ran to him, and kissed him.

All the doubting remains, of course. But for me, this story is comforting. As regards life's largest puzzle, here's the proposition: I am more sought after than seeking. I am seen before I can see.

*A postscript*. Elizabeth Marquardt, an affiliate scholar at this institute, is currently discussing the Prodigal Son story with scores of young people across the country, as part of her research on the moral and spiritual lives of the children of divorce. Marquardt is exploring how young adults who were largely abandoned in childhood by their own fathers can, and cannot, relate to a religious parable in which a father's love is strong enough to purport to teach us about divine love. Pretty important stuff. Stay tuned.

*II Corinthians 5: 7. Luke 15: 11-32.*

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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