

Propositions

*A Letter of Ideas
and Findings
Number 4, Spring 1999*

The 1999 version [of a sixth-grade math textbook currently used in about 15 states] remains drenched with product shots and trivia about everything from Barbie dolls (Mattel), Cocoa Frosted Flakes (Kellogg), Sony Play Stations, Spaulding basketballs, characters and entertainment sites owned by Disney and Warner Brothers and fast-food fare from Burger King and McDonalds. Those who oppose salting a textbook with brand names say this is the most egregious example of advertising's steady march through public education.

*New York Times
March 21, 1999*

Dear Reader,

A current ad from Levi's, the jeans company, runs lavishly across six full magazine pages. The ad portrays the shifting sands of young love, featuring photographs of five young couples, with captions telling us how long (or briefly) each couple stayed together. The captions read: (1) "Callie & Ty, three years"; (2) "Callie & Noah, one year, five months"; (3) "Noah & Kim, two and a half years"; (4) "Jeremy & Kim, eleven months (not counting three week break-up)"; and (5) "Jeremy and Andrea, a week and a half." But then we move beyond young love. The final scene shows Andrea hugging an unnamed girlfriend. Just behind the two roommates, on the kitchen wall, is an art poster declaring, "Mis Padres se Divorcian" (My Parents Get Divorced). The Levi's caption underneath reads, "at least some things last forever . . . Levi's: they go on."

Commercial advertising is arguably today's most influential cultural grammar. It makes sense to tease out what these dense and expensively constructed pieces of communication tell us about ourselves. In this case, the message to young magazine readers could not be clearer. Love doesn't last. Relationships come and go. Marriages don't last either, not even your parents' marriage. The only thing that lasts in life is the brand name that you can purchase from our company. I don't know what is more upsetting: the lie about our society contained in this ad, or the truth.

Much to our benefit, the recent history of advertising has attracted the attention of Thomas Frank, a leftist intellectual who writes for publications such as *The Nation* and *In These Times* and edits a Chicago-based journal called *The Baffler*. He is the author of *The Conquest of Cool*, a fascinating study of the U.S. advertising and menswear industries in the 1960s. Frank's focus is the massive cultural transformation from "square" to "hip" that began in earnest in the 1960s — more the brainchild of Madison Avenue, as Frank sees it, than of either the political New Left or the youth rebellion on college campuses — and that remains today "the cultural mode of the corporate moment, used to promote not only specific products but the general idea of life . . ."

Thus: "Today there are few things more beloved of our mass media than the figure of the cultural rebel, the defiant individualist resisting the mandates of the machine civilization. Whether he is an athlete decked out in mohawk and multiple-pierced ears, a policeman who plays by his own rules, an actor on a motorcycle, a movie fratboy wreaking havoc on the townies' parade, a soldier of fortune with explosive bow and arrow, a long-haired alienated cowboy gunning down square cowboys, or a rock star in leather jacket and sunglasses, he has become the paramount cliché of our popular entertainment, the preeminent symbol of the system he is supposed to be subverting. In advertising, especially, he rules supreme."

Ad spending outpaced the economy for a fifth consecutive year . . . Total U.S. media spending rose 8.3 percent in 1998, to \$79.3 billion, more than twice the growth rate of the growth domestic product . . .

Advertising Age, March 22, 1999

Frank's analysis of the ad agency Doyle Dane Bernbach — especially their astonishing Volkswagen campaign that began in 1959 — is alone worth the price of the book. DDB's Volkswagen ads helped to shift the cutting edge in advertising decisively from “square” to “hip,” especially by playing upon the consumer's desire to be an individual, to separate from the conformism of mass society.

In this sense, what advertisers increasingly sell is not simply the product — this toothpaste makes your teeth whiter, this cola tastes better — but instead pure symbolism aimed at psychological gratification that, on the face of things, has little or no discernable relationship to the product. Are you an individualist, different from the herd? Buy this car. Are you a member of the elite? Use this credit card. Want some stability? Want a relationship that will last? Buy these jeans.

Frank stresses the remarkable durability of “break the rules” symbolism within this genre of ads, as in “Somebody has to break the rules” (Dash laundry detergent, 1967) or “Break a Silly Rule” (Smirnoff vodka, 1970). But more recently, I've noticed that many “hip” ads, especially those aimed at teenagers and children, now bypass narrative completely and hardly (if at all) even refer to the product being advertised. Instead, these post-meaning ads seek strictly to create a mood or vibe. The young viewer — too cynical for any direct pitch and intimate with the grammar of advertising — is then permitted on his or her own, as it were, to associate the mood with the product.

Does this remind you of anything? Replacing explication with mood-manipulation is also increasingly popular in our political debate. Think about Vice President Al Gore on national television at his party's last two conventions, telling us at extended length in 1996 about his sister's death from lung cancer, and at equal length in 1992 about his son's suffering due to a car accident, as if publicizing these private tragedies constituted reasons to vote for him. I don't mean to single out Gore; there are many other amazing examples of this same phenomenon. Or think of how political advertising, even more than commercial advertising, is now almost completely “hip,” largely devoid of old-style pitching and, increasingly, lacking any serious content.

Of course I realize that there is another, quite different way to look at advertising. It is the “natural” language of an economically and politically free society. It is what happens when the state does not dominate life and therefore does not, by and large, seek to control what people say. In the commercial realm, the spread of purely symbolic advertising, as practiced by Levi's — or by Gatorade, when they promise us that in buying their drink we will “Be like Mike” — is inevitable in our breathtakingly affluent society, where more and more people are willing and able to pay serious money for precisely these evanescent suggestions of status and differentiation.

True enough, I suppose. But I still lean the other way on this issue. Commercial advertising today strikes me as a standing cultural reproach to the possibility of character and integrity. Shouldn't those of us who declare our concern about deteriorating child and family well-being, and about the state of civil society, be more interested than we are now, and more dismayed than we are now, about the meaning and current directions of advertising?

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4, 227-228.

Credit

In my last letter, I criticized President Clinton and (especially) Vice President Al Gore for proposing more federal subsidies for parents who use paid child care, while ignoring and thereby discouraging all other possible child care solutions, such as at-home parenting, couples who work tag-team shifts (so that at least one of them is always home with the child), or parents who would prefer part-time work, flexible work hours, job-sharing, or the opportunity to work at home. In this context, I especially criticized the unfairness of the child care tax credit, which helps employed parents to defray some of the costs of paid child care.

But in his recent State of the Union address, President Clinton proposed not only significantly increasing the size of this credit, but also extending it on a limited basis to parents who choose to stay home to care for a new baby. Unlike previous credit-enlarging proposals from the White House, which ignored at-home parents, this new version is an endorsement of the principle that full-time parents should no longer be treated by public policy as invisible and irrelevant. To his credit, President Clinton has helped to shift the terms of the child care debate. From now on, all parents count.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the details of the president's new proposal fail by a long shot to achieve the ideal of fair treatment that the Administration has now publicly embraced. To see why, imagine two look-alike families in your neighborhood, the Smiths and the Smithereens. Last year, both couples had family incomes totaling \$50,000. This year, both couples become first-time parents. The Smiths decide to put the baby in day care so that both of them can return to work. This decision costs them \$2,500 annually in child care expenses. The Smithereens, on the other hand, decide that one of them will quit work. This decision eliminates any day care costs, but reduces the Smithereens' total income by \$20,000. In purely economic terms, the Smithereen child care decision is about seven times as costly as the Smith child care decision.

Now imagine that President Clinton's entire 1999 child care package has just become law. The expanded child care tax credit available to the two-earner Smiths, who use paid child care, would jump in value from about \$600 per year to about \$1,000 per year, and could be used until the child reached age 13. The one-earner Smithereens, by contrast, could now use the child care tax credit for a benefit of about \$180, available until the baby's first birthday. Over the next five years, these new policies would effectively lower the total cost of the Smiths' day care decision by about \$5,000, or 40 percent, while lowering the cost of the Smithereens' parent-at-home decision by about \$180, or less than 0.2 percent. This is equity? This is recognition for the work that parents do?

Of course it isn't. The best solution — the only way for public policy to reflect the principle that child care means caring for children — is to both expand and universalize fully the current child care tax credit, making it available on a non-discriminatory basis to all families with pre-school children.

No Way

Dr. Janne Haaland Matlary, the Foreign Secretary of Norway, seeks to explain why Norway's Christian Democrats are now, according to some polls, the nation's second strongest political party, after the Social Democrats, and why Norway's current prime minister "is a Lutheran pastor and is the most popular prime minister in recent times.": "This may seem odd in a secularized country like Norway, but it is indicative of a search for non-material values and meaning. The government's program is strongly worded against an instrumental and pragmatic view of the human being. It states that 'many of the greatest challenges today regard non-material human needs . . . we reject a view of the human being that sees it as a being with only material needs or as an actor in a market . . . this government fights against the new perceptions of the human being that view it in instrumental terms.' Further on it is stated [by the government] that 'greed, increased materialism, sexual abuse, violence, decline of the family, and the emergence of extreme youth movements' are symptoms of the 'moral decline of society.'"

She makes two other interesting points. Fertility rates in Scandinavia have modestly increased in recent years and are now the highest in Europe. At about 2 childbirths per woman, Scandinavians now produce roughly enough children to sustain their population levels. (By contrast, fertility rates in both Italy and Spain have dropped to about 1.2; the current U.S. fertility rate is about 2; for U.S. married women, it's about 1.6.) Why do the Scandinavians have more babies? For Matlary, one main reason is the generous paid maternity leaves available in Scandinavia. In Norway, for examples, a new mother is legally entitled to 42 weeks of leave at full pay, or 52 weeks of leave at 80 percent of pay. Unpaid leave, with a legal guarantee of her job back when the leave is completed, is available for up to three years. Paid leaves for new fathers, usually totaling about six weeks, are also strongly encouraged and, in some circumstances, mandatory.

Second, the Norwegian government in 1998 implemented a new "Child Cash Support" policy aimed at equitable treatment for at-home parents. Under the new rules, parents who choose to stay home to care for young children (age three or under) are entitled to a financial subsidy exactly equal to the day care subsidy available to employed parents. Matlary calls the new policy "freedom of choice, nothing more, nothing less," and reports that its proposal and adoption in recent months "created the largest ideological debate among Norwegian women since the inception of feminism in the 1970s."

It's often helpful to question our preconceptions. Accordingly, perhaps U.S. conservatives should pay respectful attention to the Norwegian evidence on paid maternity leaves. Similarly, U.S. liberals might benefit from considering Norway's new child care policy — especially when, as described above, exactly the same topic is now emerging in the U.S., as the Administration and Congress debate what to do about the federal child care tax credit.

Dr. Janne Haaland Matlary, "Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Family Rights and Family Policies," *Familia et Vita* IV, no. 1, 1999: 5-14.

O Canada

This just in from Canada, another neighbor to the north: they too are having an intense debate about recognizing marriage in the tax code and about equal treatment for at-home parents. The argument pits the governing Liberals against the main party of opposition, the Reform Party. On March 9, the parliament defeated a motion introduced by the Reform Party: “That, in the opinion of this House, the federal tax system should be reformed to end discrimination against single-income families with children.”

According to Jason Kenney, a Reform MP, his party proposes “that we ought to raise the spousal exemption to the equivalent of the basic personal exemption so that there are no second class citizens in this country, and that we should take the discriminatory child care tax deduction and turn it into a refundable credit available to all parents regardless of their child care choices.”

The gap between the personal and spousal exemptions in the Canadian tax code reflects the current code’s bias in favor of taxing each person as an individual, and therefore *against* the principle of recognizing the married-couple household as a single unit of taxation. Among other things, such a bias effectively punishes the decision of a parent to leave the paid work force to be at home with children, since the deduction for an at-home parent is significantly less than the deduction for an employed parent. Similarly, regarding the Canadian version of what the U.S. code calls the dependent and child care tax credit, “what we are talking about here,” according to Kenney, “is the discriminatory impact of the child care tax deduction which says that people who pay someone else to raise their kids get to claim a \$7,000 deduction and those who give up a second income get to claim precisely zero.”

To date, the governing Liberals have resisted these attempts at reform. As the Minister of Finance recently suggested, the government remains committed to a policy of taxing “individual income” rather than “family income.” That is another way of saying that the nation’s basic family policy, the tax code, is based on viewing each person solely (pace Janne Matlary) as an “actor in a market” rather than as a parent sacrificing for a child or as a member of civil society displaying (Matlary again) “non-material values.”

I recognize this philosophy, but am saddened by who is advocating it. Why are major parties of the left — Liberals in Canada, Democrats in the U.S. — discarding their own traditions by so consistently choosing individualism over solidarity and so uncritically subordinating all other values to the god of the market place?

Statements by Members, *Hansard*, March 9, 1999.

Impotent

This “actor in a market” philosophy, of course, is intellectually dominant among many parties of the *right*, including, much of the time, our own U.S. Republicans. In this regard, consider a recent and familiar argument from Alan

Midway through the Question Period, the Reform benchers bowled in outrage when Mr. Peterson, the Secretary of State of Financial Institutions, said dual income families get a better tax break than single income families because they work twice as hard.

National Post
March 3, 1999

Reynolds, who directs economic research at the Hudson Institute. Reynolds is hostile to proposals for family-centered tax reform — such as reforming the child care tax credit or permitting married couples to split their income for purposes of taxation — since such proposals would typically require the creation or expansion of deductions, exemptions, and credits based on family structure and parental status. Reynolds ridicules such ideas as “tax credits for various politically favored age groups.” Fundamentally, any “exemptions, credits, and other devices” aimed directly at family-strengthening would be “economically impotent,” since none of them would accomplish what for Reynolds is the prime objective: reducing marginal tax rates for upper-income taxpayers.

Why is cutting marginal rates so important? One reason is that the U.S. economy is “running short of willing and able workers.” And why are we running short? In large part because high marginal rates are “driving skilled married women out of the labor force.” This is bad. Thus the need to focus on reducing marginal rates, which boosts the economy directly by encouraging investment and driving up labor force participation, instead of wasting money on things that are “economically impotent,” such as helping Bob and Sally (and other “politically favored age groups”) spend more time with their children.

Reynolds’ philosophy is clear. When thinking about the various societal objectives that we might choose to pursue through the tax code — the behaviors that we might encourage, the institutions that we might protect — the value of short-term economic growth trumps all other possible values. Had you imagined that the federal tax code might be big and complicated enough to embrace more than one social goal? Forget it. Every goal except boosting the GNP is either political favoritism or a pathway to economic impotence. Are certain job markets a bit too tight? Well, by all means let’s tap into that reserve army of young mothers who are still detached from the market, whiling away their time — as *volunteers!* — raising their children and running their communities. The Economy needs more workers, and the Economy must be placated.

This way of viewing the world is currently triumphant in our society. It increasingly dominates the thinking of both political parties, less a set of assertions than a set of common assumptions. But to me, this entire perspective derives from a fundamental confusion of ends and means. Economic growth is not an end in itself. The economy exists to support human flourishing, not the other way around. The whole idea of relentlessly transferring more and more of our time, relationships, and activities into the market place, all so that we might become richer, strikes me as the worship of a golden calf.

Alan Reynolds, “Rich Rewards,” *National Review*, March 22, 1999.

Choices

According to the college textbook authors David Knox and Caroline Schacht, “choices in relationships” is the best available “framework” for understanding the meaning of marriage and family life. And the main thing for college students to remember about these choices is that there are so many of them.

Thus the first table in the book's first chapter: "One Hundred and One Choices in Relationships." (Yes, it's a list.) Thus the key idea in another early section called "Factors Influencing Your Choices": "There is no one model for individuals, relationships, marriages, or families. All are characterized by an incredible array of diversity. Individuals may be described as existing on a continuum from heterosexuality to homosexuality, from rural to city dwellers, and from being single and living alone to being married and living in communes. Relationships range from cohabiting to marriage to group marriage and from being intimate and satisfying to being distant and conflictual. Family diversity includes two parents, single parent families, same sex parents, opposite sex parents, stepfamilies, families with adopted children, and multigenerational families."

Do you get the idea? *It's all about choices!* Well, since I'm as interested in choices as the next guy, I had to struggle a bit to think through why I find this book — and this approach to writing family textbooks generally — so vacuous.

In part, the book is boring. Reading one of these chapters is like trying to order food from one of those ridiculously long restaurant menus. There is no narrative to follow, no larger themes or disciplines from which we might make sense of all those lists of choices. As a result, the whole exercise becomes enervating and, one soon begins to suspect, without much redeeming value.

In part, the book is biased. Knox and Schacht conscientiously include every possible choice in their lists of choices, and also repeatedly insist that every possible choice can be a valid one. But apparently some choices merit special recognition and even encouragement from the social sciences, while others benefit from an occasional tongue-lashing. For example, in an early discussion on "Types of Family," here is the summation: "There are numerous types of families that we discuss later in the text. Single-parent families headed by either a woman or a man, childfree families, communal families, and stepfamilies are examples. Awareness of these alternative family types expands the range of choices."

On the other hand, we also learn that some "politically conservative critics have argued that there is only one true family, a husband and wife with children born after marriage." But such people operate from bad faith, the authors hasten to suggest, serving principally as apologists for the interests of certain "influential elites." Therefore: "Alternatively, we might choose the view that there is nothing inherently wrong with an array of alternative family forms (childfree, single parent families, stepfamilies, cohabiting couples)."

Yes, we certainly might choose this view, especially after we are further instructed by the authors about the dangers of "rhetoric" which suggests that "somehow the nuclear family of yesteryear with its working father, homemaking mother, and two children in suburbia was self-sufficient, patriotic, and God-fearing." (Am I imagining things, or do these words seem fairly to drip with sarcasm?) The authors then quote the historian Elaine Tyler May: "Talk about family values is a shorthand way of appealing to prejudices about minority groups, working-class people, single mothers, and homosexuals." Just in case any student might be in danger of missing the point and choosing the wrong view.

But bias is not the worst part. The worst part for me is the book's basic philosophical premise: the idea that making choices is life's central project and highest

value. Of course choice-making is a characteristically human activity, necessary for human flourishing. But surely we do not choose for the sake of choosing, as if choice-making itself constitutes that toward which we aspire. All choices aim at goods. A choice is by definition an attempt by the chooser to answer the question, “Is it worth it?” For this reason, choosing as an activity cannot be romantically separated from what is chosen.

There is a related issue, even more foreign to the world view of this textbook. Ultimately, we choose so that we might, as the Stoics put it, live according to our nature, and therefore get closer to what Vaclav Havel calls “living in truth.” Put differently, I can choose everything but my end. Yes, I can deny or ignore my end. I can make good or bad choices in attempting to discern and realize my end. But my end itself — my essential purpose or ordination, my nature, what is most true about me — is something that is given to me, like a gift beyond returning, existing largely independently of the choices I make.

It’s safe to infer that Knox and Schacht would reject this last claim. For them, choice-making not only detaches from any of the big substantive conceptions of the good — such as (just to name three possibilities) the survival of the species, obedience to the Ten Commandments, or the victory of the proletariat — but also emerges as the master process through which individual humans literally create themselves. Indeed, this whole way of thinking appears to boil down to this proposition: I create myself through my choices.

This philosophy is instantly recognizable even to those who have never read a college textbook. It is intimately connected to the world view of consumerism — I create myself through what I purchase — that is embedded in advertising. WGBH-TV, the public television station in Boston, advertises itself as “A World of Choice.” Microsoft’s Bill Gates, pressed by the interviewer Charlie Rose to sketch the philosophy, the larger meaning, of the computer technology revolution, replied that it’s all about the limitless expansion of personal choices.

Well, in some senses, yes. But any philosophy in which choice becomes the Absolute strikes me as a romantic fantasy, a denial of reality, like believing that saying something makes it so, or like believing that buying Clinique will make your wrinkles go away and prevent you from getting older.

David Knox and Caroline Schacht, *Choices in Relationships: An Introduction to Marriage and the Family*, 4th Edition (Minneapolis: West Publishing, 1994), 4-5, 8, 11, 20-23.

The Shift (cont.)

Now comes more scholarly evidence, this time from the Netherlands, regarding the question of whether it’s better for unhappily married parents to divorce rather than expose their children to on-going marital conflict and distress. Two social scientists from Utrecht University examined interview responses from a nationally representative sample of about 2,500 Dutch young people (between ages 15 and 24) and their parents. The young respondents were divided into four categories: those from stable intact families, those with parents whose marriages are seriously troubled, those from divorced single-parent homes, and those living in stepfamilies.

The scholars were especially interested in measuring the long-term effects of various family disruptions. For this reason, they examined four dimensions of adolescent and young adult well-being — physical and psychological health, the capacity to form satisfying relationships with the opposite sex, and the ability to hold down a job — in a number of families in which parental divorce had occurred, on average, ten years prior to the interview, and in which stepfamily formation had occurred, on average, 8 years prior to the interview. Within this context, they were particularly interested in testing Andrew J. Cherlin’s 1991 proposition, discussed at perhaps too much length in my last letter, that marital conflict is often worse for children than divorce.

Although this older thesis still reigns supreme in college-level family textbooks, the Dutch study contributes to a growing body of recent research disconfirming the view that parental conflict is at least as harmful as divorce. More broadly, this study constitutes yet another example of general shift in scholarly thinking, also reflected in Cherlin’s own recent work, away from optimism and toward pessimism regarding the effects of family fragmentation. Here is the study’s basic conclusion: “The results also indicate that it is important to look further than the divorce — that the effects of conflict between parents on the verge of divorce should be taken into account. But the effects clearly become stronger when the parents are in fact divorced. Transitions in family structure influence the different degrees of well-being of young people, even after controlling for such background variables as family income, sex, age, and educational level. The clear general conclusion is that youngsters from stable intact families have the strongest sense of well-being. Youngsters from single-parent families are the worst off, despite the fact that the divorce may have taken place ten years ago, and even after controlling for income.”

Ed Spruijt and Martijn de Goede, “Transitions in Family Structure and Adolescent Well-Being,” *Adolescence* 32, no. 128 (Winter 1997): 897-911.

Cherlin (Again)

Sorry, but just one more reflection about the sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University. As you may remember from last time, Cherlin recently published a study of the long-term effects of divorce on children. In this study, he substantially revises his earlier view that pre-divorce family problems are “at least” as harmful to children as divorce itself. Cherlin’s new position is that the “continuing effects” on children of family breakup, some of which emerge only as children get older, are more likely to be “a result of the divorce.” Somewhat embarrassingly for Cherlin, this new position puts him rather squarely in agreement with Judith Wallerstein, the clinical psychologist whom Cherlin has previously criticized for exaggerating the effects of divorce.

So does Cherlin mention this fascinating convergence in his March 26 presidential address to the American Population Association? Perhaps offer some reflections, based on this episode, of how qualitative clinical findings, which tend to

Third, although divorce is difficult for almost all children, subjection to long-term marital hostilities is even worse . . . family discord has more of a negative impact on children than the type of marital structure in which they live. A stable one-parent family is better than an unstable two-parent family.

David H. Olson and John DeFrain, *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and Strengths*, 2nd Edition, 1997.

emerge early on in a debate, can usefully frame the questions to be pursued later, and on a larger scale, by quantitative sociologists?

No. Instead, Cherlin announces that the entire public debate on this topic has been distorted by “extremists.” And one particularly unhelpful “extremist” is Judith Wallerstein, who “leaps” to conclusions, does not realize that the families in her clinical practice are not representative of American society, etc., etc. As a result, “most of the public” and “even many social scientists” struggling to understand this issue have been “puzzled and poorly informed.”

On the other hand, Cherlin clearly wants us to believe, there is hope. For amid all this harmful “extremism,” occupying an eminently respectable “middle position,” courageously indifferent to political fashion, ever attentive to complexity, always putting scholarly integrity ahead of public posturing, stands . . . Andrew Cherlin. You see, if a clinician publishes some controversial observations on Monday, she is an extremist. But if ten sociologists using large-scale data sets confirm those very same observations on Wednesday, they are reputable truth-tellers carving out a “middle position.” And then on Friday, of course, when you’re giving a speech in New York, it’s open season again on Monday’s extremists. What a pity.

Andrew J. Cherlin, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Christine McRae, “Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Through the Life Course,” *American Sociological Review* 63 (April 1998): 239-249. “Caroming Between Extremes, Social Scientists Can Overlook Reality,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1999.

Normalizing Divorce (cont.)

A New York City subway ad from the firm of Wilens & Baker, P.C.: “Call 1-800-DIVORCE. When diamonds aren’t forever.”

A father to Anna, his 12-year-old daughter: “You do not run out on your mother!” Anna’s reply: “No, that’s your job.” This dialogue is from *Stepmom*, a recent movie about divorce and new lovers starring Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, and Ed Harris. In a *New York Times* survey called “Taking the Children” — a round-up of current movies to which parents might want to bring along the kids — the reviewer Peter M. Nichols concludes: “The film is hardly ground-breaking, but it does a reasonably good job with the stresses of changing relationships . . . Parents obviously should be alert to the reaction of their own children, particularly those in similar situations.”

From New Jersey’s *Bergen Record*: “How do you feel when your parents argue about visitation?” the teacher asks the small group of children digging into their lunch boxes. So begins the weekly school-based support group for pupils whose parents have separated or divorced. It’s a far cry from the days when schools offered such extracurricular clubs as chess, drama, or gardening almost exclusively. The idea of schools, as institutions, getting so intimately involved with children’s personal lives was once unthinkable. Today, it’s unavoidable. At least 85 schools around New Jersey — mostly elementary schools — now offer such peer-support groups, a result of administrators realizing that many children were

too worried, too sad, or too enraged about family strife to attend to the everyday task of leaning.”

From *www.divorcecoach.com*: “**Divorce Coach** provides David Knox, Ph.D. or Caroline Schacht, MA e-mailing you answers to your specific divorce questions (\$1 for first question, \$10 for each additional question) within 24 hours. The divorce coaches have both personal and professional experience with divorce . . .” What a surprise. And yes, this is the *same* team of Knox and Schacht whose college textbook, *Choices in Relationships*, is reviewed above.

Peter M. Nichols, “Taking the Children,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1999. Ruth Padawer, “Bringing together children of divorce,” *Bergen Record*, March 14, 1999.

Cultural J-Curve? (cont.)

To celebrate the modest but growing evidence of a possible cultural turnaround regarding marriage, let us now praise Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma. I know very little about the guy, but in his recent inaugural address, he became, to the best of my knowledge, the first governor ever to propose, as a serious statewide goal, the strengthening of marriage: “By the year 2010, the divorce rate should be cut by one third. Our divorce rate significantly exceeds the national average. It must be reduced. Our out of wedlock birthrate — the surest indicator of social decay and future poverty — must also be cut. To reduce it by one third by 2010 assures social stability, upward mobility, and the family nourishment essential to success in life.” I can’t think of any two goals more important for a governor (or president) to propose, or for us as a society to debate and embrace.

Inaugural Address of Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma, January 11, 1999.

Elsewhere

Where does hope come from? Vaclav Havel, who has given the question considerable thought, finally concludes that it comes from “elsewhere.” The gift and virtue of hope “transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.” For Havel, hope’s “deepest roots are in the transcendental,” though Havel himself “can’t . . . say anything concrete about the transcendental.”

Yet Havel speaks quite concretely about what hope is *not*. We cannot properly understand hope “as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or of some favorable sign in the world.” Hope does *not* derive from any sense of “joy” that “things are going well” or might be “headed for early success.” We do *not* experience hope because we imagine that something “stands a chance to succeed.” Therefore: “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

. . . take no thought of
the harvest, But only of
proper sowing.

T.S. Eliot,
Choruses from "The
Rock"

In 1975, Havel was a 39 year old playwright who had been censored and banned by Czechoslovakia's unreconstructed Communist regime. He had spent most of 1974 working in a brewery in Bohemia. In April of 1975, he wrote a letter to Dr. Gustav Husak, the General Secretary of the nation's Communist Party. In the letter, Havel describes a deepening "spiritual and moral crisis of society" lurking beneath the orderly "surface" of the dictatorship. And why is this crisis growing? Because Dr. Husak's regime draws its life from "the worst in us": "egotism, hypocrisy, indifference, cowardice, fear, resignation, and the desire to escape every personal responsibility, regardless of the general consequences." He signed the letter "Vaclav Havel, Writer," stamped it himself, and took it to the post office. He never heard from Husak, other than an assurance from an assistant that the leader was too busy to read it. Several years later, they put him in jail.

Forget the fact that Havel is now president of the Czech Republic, or that his unanswered 1975 letter to Dr. Husak is now recognized as one of the great letters of our century, in some ways analogous to Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." What's worth remembering is that in 1975, when, according to almost everyone, there were virtually no "favorable signs" in Communist Czechoslovakia that things might "turn out well," Havel determined that it "made sense" to write a letter Dr. Gustav Husak, urging him in utterly good faith to "consider seriously the matters to which I have tried to draw your attention." That is hope. And it comes from "elsewhere."

Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 181; and "Letter to Dr. Husak," in *Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 3-35.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

P.S. If you would send me the names of any friends and colleagues who might enjoy receiving a free copy of *Propositions*, I'd be very grateful. And to say thank you, I'd be happy to send you a free packet of recent interesting stuff from the Institute.

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