

# Propositions

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Dear Reader,

For politicians seeking to reduce or eliminate the “marriage penalty” in the federal tax code, in which some married couples jointly pay more in taxes than they would have paid as unmarried individuals, there are two ways to proceed. The first is to treat married couples as joint economic partnerships, similar to other legally recognized joint partnerships, from law firms to Mom-and-Pop grocery stores. That would mean treating the married couple as a single tax-paying unit, permitting the spouses to share their income for purposes of taxation. For example, if one spouse earns \$50,000 and the other stays at home with the baby, they earn, for tax purposes, \$25,000 each.

Economically, this policy favors all married couples, since it would maximize the amount of family income taxed at lower rates. Socially, this policy favors marriage as an institution and recognizes the legitimacy of at-home parenting. Philosophically, the policy beholds marriage for what it is: a genuine partnership in which, as our traditions say, the two become one. Politically, this way of proceeding is either dangerous or visionary, depending on how you look at it, since it departs dramatically from our current approach and since it amounts to a significant, not just symbolic, tax cut for married couples.

The second approach is to tax married couples as individuals. This approach requires policy makers, or in some versions of the idea the spouses themselves, to engage what historians call counter-factual history. The goal is to figure out what each spouse’s tax burden would have been *if the spouses had never married*, then, in real life, tax the couple on this individualized basis.

Economically, this policy benefits two-earner couples, who are, almost by definition, the main victims of the marriage penalty as currently defined. Why? Usually, the combined income of the two earners pushes them, as a joint-filing couple, into a higher tax bracket. Consequently, effectively taxing these particular couples as individuals would, in most cases, reduce their tax burden.

Socially, this policy’s main effect is to reward paid employment — if both spouses work, they get a tax cut — and thereby create further disincentives for at-home parenting and all other non-market labor. In this sense, the policy stems from what economists call “supply side” thinking, since one of the policy’s main effects is to increase the size of the paid labor force and therefore stimulate economic growth. Philosophically, the policy is radically individualistic. Marriage, in this view, is a private lifestyle option no more deserving of political special treatment — that is, recognizing it as a joint partnership — than would be, say, college roommates living together.

Politically, this policy is thrice-blessed. First, it permits politicians to “do something” about the marriage penalty. Second, it doesn’t cost nearly as much in lost tax revenue as the alternative, since only about half of the married couples in the

country would benefit from it. Finally, it would stimulate economic growth and therefore might, over the long run, even help to increase total tax revenues.

For me, the most disappointing tax policy development of the current presidential campaign is that George W. Bush has decidedly embraced this second, tax-them-as-individuals approach to reducing the marriage penalty. His plan would create a special tax break of about \$450 to \$750 per year — to simplify, let's call it \$600 per year — for most middle-income, two-earner couples. The proposed mechanism is that two-earner couples would be permitted to deduct 10 percent of up to \$30,000 of the income of the lower-earning spouse.

The Bush plan would shift a greater share of the overall tax burden onto one-earner couples with children. Moreover, by creating a \$600 per year incentive for the second parent to enter the paid labor force, his proposal would end up reducing the amount of time that U.S. parents spend with their children. Some features of the Bush tax plan, such as his proposal to double the size of the child tax credit, strike me as terrific. But this proposal on marriage is a step in the wrong direction. It would be better to do nothing about the current tax code's mistreatment of marriage than to do what Governor Bush is proposing.

Consider the ironies. A policy idea that originated on the feminist-labor left in the 1970s is now being proposed by a presidential candidate of the right. And a classic proposition of 1980s supply-side economic thinking — reduce marginal rates for upper-income couples in order to encourage more college-educated mothers to enter the labor force and thereby boost the economy — has now re-entered the national policy debate under the guise, of all things, of strengthening marriage. What a funny joke.

### **Sesame Street (cont.)**

In a recent episode of *Sesame Street*, the educational TV show for pre-schoolers, a little girl is standing in front of a crayon drawing. The drawing consists of two adult-looking people, a male and a female, sitting on a couch, with a dog on the floor beside them. The little girl, pointing to the drawing, proudly says: "This is my family." Close-up of the female: "That's my mom." Close-up of the male: "That's my big brother." Close-up of the dog: "That's my dog." Then the dog acts silly. The scene ends with laughs all around. Her family is really great.

Each detail of this little vignette — from slyly turning what initially looked like a father into "my big brother," to the funny-happy ending, to the show's decision to present only one portrait of "this is my family" — is crudely didactic. The unmistakable message is that families without fathers are absolutely normal and really great.

I know that the people at *Sesame Street* want children to recognize that families today come, as they say, in all shapes and sizes. They especially don't want the children of divorce and unwed childbearing to feel bad or blamed. OK. But this piece is pure propaganda, overtly aimed at deconstructing the two-parent family. Is it too much to ask *Sesame Street* to respect the fact that children care about their fathers?

## Going, Going . . . ?

For marriage buffs — defined as people who spend at least some time each week worrying about marriage as a social institution — simply paying attention can be disconcerting. Many everyday occurrences that most people view as normal can strike the marriage buff as signs of the end of civilization. Here are three examples.

In Mississippi, the heart of the Bible Belt, Governor Kirk Fordice, age 65, announces his decision to seek a divorce from Pat, his wife of many years. Pat is not amused. About that time, the governor begins taking trips to France and to Gulf Shores, Alabama, with his former sweetheart from his junior high school days in Memphis, Tennessee. These facts get reported in the media. Fordice is livid. He announces that he considered resigning “just to keep from going through this [publicity] in trying to have a transition from one marriage into another, which is done all the time with complete impunity and no publicity.” What upsets the marriage buff about this story is that Fordice is correct about this being done all the time with complete impunity.

Wendy Wasserstein, the Pulitzer-prize winning playwright, had a baby girl, Lucy, on September 12, 1999. And, according to the *New York Times*, “what a production it was!” Meryl Streep dropped by the hospital, incognito, just to see the baby. An important costume designer decorated the hospital room. Lots of impressive theater people came to visit. “If you haven’t won a Tony, can you go?” quipped a well-known set designer. The baby’s father “was not announced,” according to the *Times*. Ms. Wasserstein, it turns out, had decided “to have the baby alone.” The *Times* continues: “Still, there are a large number of men, gay and straight, whom Ms. Wasserstein regards as ‘husbands.’ They include [a number of impressive theater people]. She knew that no child of hers would lack for ‘fathers.’”

*Salon*, the webzine, has a regular feature called “Mothers Who Think.” (As opposed, I suppose, to mothers who don’t think.) Recently, in a M.W.T. series called “Whither Marriage?”, a 30-something mother of a new baby, who lives with her boyfriend-who-is-the-father, offers her maternal thinking on “The Case Against Matrimony”: “I am not whining about or regretting the events of the last three decades. When my parents divorced in the late 70s, we children went along with it like troupers . . . But we [18- to 35-year-olds] also have no fantasies about coasting through the next 50 years on the coattails of a weakened and disparaged [marriage] contract that, thanks to boomer innovation, now includes options like pre-nup clauses . . . My generation would just as soon steer clear of the fatuous, feel-good mess of getting divorced and remarried. The tradition that was passed down to us — in which divorce is a logical and expected conclusion to a marriage — is one we would just as soon pass by.” What upsets the marriage buff about this story is that this young “mother who thinks” is correct about the tradition that was passed down to her.

“Fordice considered quitting,” (Jackson) *Clarion-Ledger*, August 26, 1999. Dinitia Smith, “The Newest Wasserstein Creation Comes Home,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1999. Larissa Phillips, “The Case Against Matrimony,” *Salon.com*, November 18, 1999.

*I would like a partner, but not with the marriage tag.*

Woman interviewed in the *New York Times*, January 9, 2000.

*It’s important that there be men in Leo’s life, but not necessarily someone he calls “father.”*

Leo’s mom, interviewed in *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), January 7, 2000.

## Improved States

On the other hand, fatalism is a spiritual defect, and some marriage buffs do more than curse the darkness. In Wisconsin, the new state budget provides for a full-time position in the Department of Health and Family Services that will have the responsibility of working with clergy and civic leaders across the state to develop community-wide marriage policies. Pioneered by Mike McManus, the founder and president of Marriage Savers, based in Maryland, these policies bring together local clergy to develop shared standards for marriage preparation and education. When implemented, one main result of the policy is that all engaged couples, as a condition of getting married in a local church or synagogue, participate in a cooperatively developed program of pre-marital counseling and education.

In Florida, the organization Family First recently released a study of state marriage trends, *Marriage Matters: A Social Analysis of the State of the Union*. Family First is one of several state organizations around the country — others include the Michigan Family Forum and the Washington Family Council — that increasingly focus on marriage, including marriage law reform and/or marriage education.

In Oklahoma last year, Governor Frank Keating made cutting the state's divorce rate by one third an explicit goal of his Administration. Keating's speech was the first time that any U.S. governor ever formally proposed such an objective. Shortly thereafter in Arkansas, Governor Mike Huckabee sponsored a state conference on the family, focusing especially on marriage. "It's time to declare a marital emergency in Arkansas," declared the governor. He called for cutting the state's divorce rate by half. In New Mexico, a governor's conference on marriage is currently in the planning stages. In Utah, Governor Michael Leavitt has created a 13-member Commission on Marriage to "recommend and, where possible, help implement ways to promote, strengthen and increase awareness of the importance of marriage."

Most of this activity is unprecedented. Some if it seems to be working. There may be something stirring. Some people are calling it a marriage movement.

"Budget Provision Aims to Strengthen Marriage," press release (Madison, WI: Office of Assembly Speaker Scott R. Jenson, November 3, 1999). *Summary of Budget Provisions, 1999* (Madison, WI: Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 1999). *Marriage Matters: A Social Analysis of the State of the Union* (Tampa: Family First, 1999). "Governor Huckabee calls for a 50% cut in Arkansas, U.S. divorces," press release (Little Rock, AR: Office of Governor Mike Huckabee, October 20, 1999). Patty Henetz, "Commission Takes on Marriage," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 28, 1998. Maggie Gallagher, "They Do: The Marriage Movement in America," *National Review*, November 8, 1999.

## Lifetime Commitments

On a public affairs TV program, Patricia Schroeder, the former Democratic Congresswoman from Colorado and current president of the American Association of Publishers, is asked to explain why women are typically more supportive than men of government programs to help the needy. Because, she says, millions of middle class married women are "one divorce away" from dependence on such

programs. I suspect that Schroeder is right, in part because the divorce culture that she views as politically important is also viewed by advertising professionals today as economically important.

A current magazine ad for Charles Schwab, the investment brokerage firm, features a photograph of Susan and her five-year-old son Spencer. When Susan was ready to invest, she went to Schwab because “I want as much money as possible to go into the Susan-and-Spencer pot, not someone else’s.” The Schwab professionals, Susan discovered, “truly want to help people . . . They always answer my questions. One even gave Spencer a chocolate Easter bunny when we opened his account.” Susan plans on investing with Schwab “for the rest of my life. Spencer has a great deal of life ahead. I’m his mother, and I want the best for him.”

The ad describes Susan simply as a “working mother,” but the main point could hardly be clearer. Susan and Spencer are on their own. Schwab can help. Other ads are even more blunt. A TV commercial for John Hancock, the life insurance company, speaks directly to “the single mother”: “You are a survivor. You are alone, but you are strong.” John Hancock is there for you. Corporate advertisers have obviously concluded that single mothers are receptive to the idea that they need special help from business, just as political analysts have concluded that women voters are receptive to the idea that they are “one divorce away” from needing special help from government.

It’s true, of course, that a poverty-stricken single mother who depends on government assistance is different, in several respects, from a middle class divorcee who buys her insurance from John Hancock or does her investing with Charles Schwab. And yes, both John Hancock and Charles Schwab want to, and do, sell their products to married people as well as to single mothers, so it’s not the case (as it would be for, say, divorce lawyers) that these firms have an obvious economic interest in the continuation of a high-divorce society. But still, these ads give me the creeps. Perhaps it’s because these corporate promises — you can depend on us “for the rest of your life” — so blatantly echo the increasingly defunct marriage promise.

## **Another Drink**

On the subway in New York, a new series of advertisements for Chivas Regal, the whiskey, displays three slogans. “The playground just keeps getting bigger.” And: “Less curriculum. More vitae.” And: “Love has no boundaries.”

Of course, there is nothing new here. The imagery of breaking rules and ignoring boundaries — Be a Nonconformist, Buy This Product — has been a staple of commercial advertising for four decades now. And I suppose it’s possible to worry too much about the effects of these ads. Maybe none of it really sinks in. At the same time, if my calling in life was to denigrate and ultimately to destroy the adult character structure, I know what I would do. I would tell everyone, as often as possible, that life is a big playground, that education inhibits living, and that the heart deserves whatever it wants.

*Freedom works.*

Republican Party logo.

## Ads Up

In a forthcoming essay, David Bosworth of the University of Washington says that “our concerns about the effects of advertising on the nation’s social health should go far deeper than the content of any one ad campaign, however odious its message. The very nature of public discourse, political striving, and private behavior has been corrupted by the spirit and method of commercial solicitation.” Does this sound alarmist? Listen to his reasoning: “Our conversion to the climate of commercialization bears with it a destructive tonal shift toward cynicism. We begin to believe that all communication is suspect, that every message, public and private, is ‘brought to us by’ the deliberate falsehoods of hidden self-interest. And when everything from racist memorabilia to Lady Di kitsch is converted into a ‘collectible’ with a market value, when every public figure — from the politician who parrots the policies of those who fund his own ad campaigns to the military hero who quickly converts to a corporate spokesperson — seems to adopt the spin and gloss of solicitation, we can’t help but sense that the nation’s moral compass has also shifted, our idealism hijacked to other ends.”

I agree with Bosworth, but even for those who are skeptical, consider the purely empirical matter of what the advertisers call the degree of saturation. For the people who advertise Coca-Cola, full saturation would mean that no one on the planet would ever go anywhere or do anything without, at that same moment, being importuned to drink a Coke. Framed more generally, among our vast number of individual daily experiences with other people, places, things, and ideas, what proportion of them are now sponsored or influenced by commercial advertising? Is the proportion growing? How fast? The answers to these questions are “a very large number”, “yes”, and “exponentially.”

I’ve started keeping a file in my office called “For Sale.” Here are a clutch of items from August, 1999. Bruce Springsteen returned that month to New Jersey, the state with which he and his songs are so closely identified, to begin his first U.S. tour in more than ten years, performing in East Rutherford’s Continental Airlines Arena. Meanwhile in Atlanta, we learn that the new Philips Arena, named for Philips Electronics, will be advertised by a very large sign — six stories tall and 150 feet wide — that in turn is festooned with various corporate logos. Responding to local criticism — “My goodness, man, is there anything we won’t do for a dollar?” asks Jim Wooten of *The Atlanta Journal* — arena officials say that the huge “marquee” will become a new “downtown icon.” Besides, they point out, “advertising elements” are “typical of most new entertainment complexes around the country.”

In the *Washington Post*, Robert Kuttner, a prominent Bosworthian on this issue who co-edits *The American Prospect* and is the author of *Everything for Sale*, writes on August 16 that: “In the 1950s, *Mad Magazine* ran a satire with commercials on postage stamps. How preposterous. But with stamps already featuring pop figures, it’s only a matter of time before product pitches on stamps will be sold.” Well, it was only *seven days later* that the Associated Press announced the formation of a Florida-based company called Postage4Free.com that gives customers free, first-class postage stamps on business-sized envelopes in exchange for their personal consumer profiles. The stamps and envelopes “are sponsored by advertisers who

. . . the mayor of West Homestead, Pa., noting that sports stadiums seem to be renamed left and right after corporate sponsors, announced last year that his small town would rename itself if a sponsor could be found to pay it \$1 million . . .

news story, *New York Times*, January 11, 2000

get space for their pitch on the envelope or pay to have tear-off coupons attached to the back.” This arrangement allows advertisers to target customers (envelop them?) based on their specific profiles.

In Philadelphia on August 14, at the wedding of Tom Anderson and Sabrina Root, 24 companies “sponsored” the nuptials in exchange for advertising space at the wedding and reception. Everything from the wedding ring to the honeymoon — goods and services totalling an estimated \$34,000 — was paid for by advertisers: “The bride drew the line at having advertising banners draped across the aisle. But her perfume came from a local Oscar de la Renta distributor, and the coffee was provided gratis from a neighborhood supplier. Advertisers had their names appear on the invitations and thank-you cards, on cards at the buffet, on scrolls at the dinner table, in an ad placed in a local independent newspaper and in a verbal ‘thank you’ that followed the first toast.”

Finally, we learn in August that more than 500 colleges and universities around the country have begun using advertiser-sponsored Web sites for student E-mail services and for on-line courses and course outlines. As the *New York Times* put it: “Welcome to College. Now Meet Our Sponsor.”

So much for August. More recently, on and around New Year’s Day 2000, fans of college football enjoyed, as always, the famous college bowl games. Games such as the FedEx Orange Bowl, the Nokia Sugar Bowl, and the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl.

What is to be done? Bosworth offers two suggestions. First, that “a simple prohibition should be added to the standard ones that now apply to all publicly supported education: no weapons, no drugs, and no solicitation.” And second, that a gathering of scholars and leaders, drawn from across the political spectrum, examine the issue together and seek to determine what if anything should be done about the spreading impact of commercial solicitation. If you are interested, please let me know.

David Bosworth, “Brought to You by: the Selling of America’s Children,” forthcoming. Neil Strauss, “Necessary Springsteen Keeps the Faith,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1999. David Firestone, “Criticism Greeted Sign in Atlanta,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1999. Robert Kuttner, “The Price is Wrong,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 1999. Associated Press, “Want free postage? Just give personal info,” (Jackson) *Clarion-Ledger*, August 23, 1999. Reuters, “Couple sells ads to pay for wedding,” *MSNBC.com*, August 16, 1999. Lisa Guernsey, “Welcome to College. Now Meet Our Sponsor,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1999.

## **New Studies**

In my last letter, discussing an astonishingly incompetent study by Henry N. Ricciuti of Cornell University published in the *Journal of Family Psychology* and then publicized further in the *New York Times*, I harrumphed that “articles like these have consequences,” since some people out there — and if you’re reading this, you know who you are — love nothing more than to declare that “new studies” show that the earth is actually flat, then cite a study such as Ricciuti’s as their evidence. And sure enough, the Ricciuti study has already started turning up, like a bad penny, when academics need a footnote to show that divorce and unwed child-bearing do not harm children.

*Proof of the triumph of advertising, its actual conversion of our hearts and minds, rests in the amazing fact that almost no one believes that he or she is personally affected by its messages. Imagine: a 280 billion dollar a year industry with no acknowledged impact.*

David Bosworth

In the forthcoming issue of the *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, Martha Albertson Fineman, a legal scholar, takes aim at several recent reports on civil society in the U.S., including *A Call to Civil Society*, released by our institute. Fineman is particularly keen to distance herself from people who worry about “the decline of the two-parent family.” Why? Well, she has many reasons, but one of them concerns new research findings: “new studies call into question the conclusions of the civil society advocates that single parenthood is harmful to children.” And which “new studies” does she have in mind? Only one, it turns out: the Ricciuti study. Fineman then continues: “In one recent example, a large multiethnic study from Cornell University indicated that single motherhood does not necessarily compromise preparedness for school, indicating that what mattered most was the mothers’ ability and educational level.”

Note that Fineman offers a broad conclusion (“new studies show”) followed by a specific illustration (“for example”), but uses the same piece of evidence for both assertions. Watch how this works. There are many Grand Canyons in the United States. (See Grand Canyon, Arizona.) For example, there is a Grand Canyon in Arizona. (See Grand Canyon, Arizona.) Note also the give-away word “necessarily.” If Professor Fineman was being cross-examined, she could point out that, technically, she is not denying that growing up in a single-parent home frequently or even typically increases the risks facing children. No, strictly speaking, she is simply reminding us that measurable harm does not occur *necessarily*, by definition, in every single case. As if someone had disagreed with this formulation.

Finally, remember that the Ricciuti study itself — Fineman’s entire corpus of “new studies” — is absolutely worthless. The particulars are in my last letter, but consider again the conclusion of the respected family scholar Norval Glenn of the University of Texas: “These deficiencies in the definition and measurement of the independent variable make the findings of this study essentially meaningless.”

But meaningless or not, let’s play a game. For the next few months, every time you find someone claiming that “new studies” indicate that family fragmentation is a benign trend, check the source. I’ll bet you’ll find the Ricciuti study. And I’ll bet you’ll find it sitting there all alone, shivering in the cold, since — Ricciuti and ideologues such as Fineman notwithstanding — serious researchers today overwhelmingly agree that single parenthood compromises child well-being. Whatever you find, please let me know, and I’ll publish what we learn.

Henry N. Ricciuti, “Single Parenthood and School Readiness in White, Black, and Hispanic 6- and 7-Year-Olds,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 13, no. 3 (September 1999). Martha Albertson Fineman, “The Family in Civil Society,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75, no. 2 (January 2000).

## **New Studies, II**

Writers intent on denying or questioning the connection between family disintegration and bad outcomes for children constantly remind us that “correlation does not prove causation.” The mere fact that children in one-parent homes are much more likely to be poor, for example, does not prove that single parenthood itself increases the likelihood that a child will be poor. The actual cause of child poverty could be . . . something else, which researchers have not “controlled” for.

In her *Chicago-Kent Law Review* article, Martha Albertson Fineman trots out this accusation with considerable fanfare. The fact that children from two-parent homes do better in school, she says, does not show that single parenthood increases the likelihood that a child will do poorly in school. The real source of the problem could be, probably is . . . something else. Shame on all those scholars who forget to take these other variables into account. Yet when it comes to naming names, Fineman suddenly loses her voice, failing to cite a single specific example of the problem she is describing. This reticence is not surprising, since the charge itself is largely nonsense. Twenty years ago, maybe she could have located enough meaningful examples to sustain the point. But today, researchers typically bend over backwards on this issue of “controls,” especially when the topic is the effects of family structure on children.

For example, a recent study based on data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse finds that rates of drug use and abuse are lowest among adolescents living with their two biological parents. And yes, the researchers “controlled” for everything they could think of that might reduce — do what scholars call “make go away” — the apparent causal influence of family structure. Yet the correlations they found between family structure and drug use do not appear to be artifacts of other conditions: “Economic resources and residential mobility fail to explain these relationships, thus casting doubt on their ability to explain the association between family structure and an important adolescent behavior.”

In general, skin color, place of residence, family income, gender, parents’ educational attainment — all of these variables matter. But so does family structure.

Fineman, *ibid.* John P. Hoffmann and Robert A. Johnson, “A National Portrait of Family Structure and Adolescent Drug Use,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60, no. 3 (August 1998).

## **New Studies, III**

A recent study from Israel finds that losing a parent during childhood, through either death or divorce, seems to increase the risk of suffering from depression as an adult. Moreover, parental divorce appears significantly to outweigh parental death as a risk factor for adult depression. While the study focuses largely on the childhood family experiences of a group of adults currently suffering from major depression, one of the study's most intriguing findings concerns the study's control group, which was drawn from the general population: “Although free of any formal personal or family psychopathology, control subjects with a history of early parental loss reported lower incomes, had been divorced more frequently, were more likely to be living alone, were more likely to smoke or have smoked cigarettes and had more physical illness . . . [These] findings permit the tentative suggestion that even in the absence of overt psychopathology, individuals who have experienced early parental loss are more likely to manifest features which could be indicative of 'neurotic traits' than individuals who have not experienced early parental loss.”

O. Agid, *et. al.*, “Environment and vulnerability to major psychiatric illness: a case control study of early parental loss in major depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia,” *Molecular Psychology* 4, no. 2 (1999).

## Time and Again

Item: A new study on the effects of day care from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development finds, after carefully controlling for everything, that the more hours that a child spends in day care during the first three years of life, the less affection the child is likely to show the mother and the less sensitivity the mother is likely to show the child. These associations were described by the scholars as modest, but significant.

Here is how the study's main finding was described in *Time* magazine: "But it's important to note that this concern relates mainly to the child's first year, and especially the first four months." But here is what the study says: "It is important to note that these associations did not differ significantly across ages of assessment. Thus, there is no indication that over the first three years of life there is any particular age at which the qualities of the mother-child interaction are differentially sensitive to the number of hours the child is in nonmaternal care."

NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, "Child Care and Mother-Child Interactions in the First Three Years of Life," *Developmental Psychology* 35, no. 6 (November 1999). Amy Dickenson, "The Mother Lode: A new study of day care will make many moms feel guilty for using it. But they shouldn't.", *Time*, November 15, 1999.

## A World of Adjectives

In my last letter, I quarreled with the notion put forward by a prominent doctor that we live in "a world of molecules." Of course molecules exist, but they do not, on their own, convey the direction or meaning of things. Reflecting on this theme, Dr. R. Maurice Boyd, the pastor of The City Church, New York, citing authors from the Greeks to C.S. Lewis, put it better than I did. Leave aside molecules for a moment, he said. In the most important sense, we do not live in a world of nouns. We live instead in a world of adjectives, in which everything seen and known describes and points to something beyond itself.

Listen to Peter L. Berger define an essential trait of personhood itself as a "signal of transcendence": "In the observable human propensity to order reality there is an intrinsic impulse to give cosmic scope to this order, an impulse that implies not only that the human order in some way corresponds to an order that transcends it, but that this transcendent order is of such a character that man can trust himself and his destiny to it."

Sound abstract? Berger makes it concrete by reflecting on a mother comforting her child: "A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream . . . beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred or invisible, and in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his mother . . . It is she (and in many cases she alone) who has the power to banish the chaos and restore the benign shape of the world . . . She will speak or sing to the child, and the content of this communication will invariably be the same — 'Don't be afraid — everything is in order, everything is all right.' If all goes well, the child will be reassured, his trust in reality recovered . . ."

*Is the mother lying to the child? . . . 'Everything is in order, everything is all right' — this is the basic formula of maternal and parental reassurance. Not just this particular anxiety, not just this particular pain — but everything is all right. The formula can, without in any way violating it, be translated into a statement of cosmic scope — 'Have trust in being.' This is precisely what the formula implies. And if we are to believe the child psychologists . . . this is an experience that is absolutely essential to the process of becoming a human person . . .*

[Yet this] representation can be justified only within a religious (strictly speaking a supernatural) frame of reference. In this frame of reference the natural world within which we are born, love, and die is not the only world, but only the foreground of another world in which love is not annihilated in death, and in which, therefore, the trust in the power of love to banish chaos is justified. Thus man's ordering propensity implies a transcendent order, and each ordering gesture is a signal of this transcendence. The parental role is not based on a loving lie. On the contrary, it is a witness to the ultimate truth of man's situation in reality."

A mother reassuring her child that everything is all right. That's quite an adjective.

Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 61-64.

## A Lot of Explaining

On *Inside the Actors Studio*, a television interview program, the host asks the actor Robert De Niro whether or not he believes in God. De Niro gives him a perfect look ("Are you lookin' at me?") and says: "If God exists, He has a lot of explaining to do." The line gets a big laugh from the audience, which seems instantly to recognize and agree with the point De Niro is making: How can we take seriously the proposition that an omnipotent and all-loving God created a world shot through with evil and suffering?

Several years ago, also on TV, I saw the comedian George Carlin do a whole routine based on this apparent logical absurdity. Let me get this straight, Carlin said. God is in charge and God made everything. He made traffic jams, mud slides, famine, Hitler, infant death syndrome, child abusers, war, the Black Plague, cancer, depression, birth defects, and all the other diseases, afflictions, and human atrocities and stupidities that strike us almost purely at random and cause pain beyond measure. And one more thing: *He loves us very much!* Huge laugh.

During the Second World War, at Magdalen College, Oxford, in England, C.S. Lewis gave a remarkable talk on what he called the problem of futility: the fear and belief that life ultimately is without the possibility of success and makes no sense. As was often the case with Lewis, especially when dealing with the biggest questions, he did not try to say everything. But he did say one powerful thing. Quoting A.E. Housman's line, "Whatever brute and blackguard made the world," Lewis makes his stand on the fact that "there is a catch. If a Brute and Blackguard made the world, then he also made our minds. If he made our minds, he also made the very standard in them whereby we judge him to be a Brute and Blackguard." Well,

*And how am I to face  
the odds  
Of man's bedevilment  
and God's?  
I, a stranger and afraid  
In a world I never  
made.*

A.E. Housman, *Last  
Poems*

now. It seems that our pessimism has a contradiction at its center: “You must trust the universe in one respect even in order to condemn it in every other.”

Lewis won't let up: “The more seriously we take our own charge of futility the more we are committed to the implication that reality in the last resort is not futile at all. The defiance of the good atheist hurled at an apparently ruthless and idiotic cosmos is really an unconscious homage to something in or behind that cosmos which he recognizes as infinitely valuable and authoritative: for if mercy and justice were really private whims of his own with no objective and impersonal roots, and if he realized this, he could not go on being indignant. The fact that he arraigns heaven itself for disregarding them means that at some level of his mind he knows they are enthroned in a higher heaven still.”

That's very good, but as I recalled De Niro's bemused defiance, what follows is better: “I cannot and never could persuade myself that such defiance is displeasing to the supreme mind.” There is something that Lewis views as unintentionally “holy” about an angry challenge of this sort: “the man who accepts our ordinary standard of good and by it hotly criticizes divine justice receives the divine approval: the orthodox, pious people who palter with that standard in the attempt to justify God are condemned.”

Very, very good. The world makes no sense? Well, *we* make sense whenever we reason, and whenever our denunciation of reality contains within it a hidden loyalty to that same reality that is the only possible source of our norms of judgment. Of course, that's not all the explaining that needs to be done. But it's an interesting start. That is what I have been wanting to say to Robert De Niro.

C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 66-67, 70.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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