

Propositions

In this letter

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Dear Reader:

Almost single-handedly, Senator John McCain has revived the concept of personal honor as both a rationale for seeking the presidency and the proposed basis of a governing political philosophy. McCain had relatively little to say about conventional “issues” such as taxes or foreign policy. More than a platform, McCain offered himself. Mostly, he talked about honor, duty, and patriotism. These ideals, he told us, give his life meaning. Reviving them was the basis of his political “crusade.” Living according to the demands of honor, he also repeatedly suggested, was what most clearly distinguished him from his opponents. Many voters around the country responded enthusiastically to this appeal.

Is McCainism a short-term phenomenon, stemming primarily from the senator’s personal charisma and life story? Or will an emergent politics of honor and patriotism influence our public discourse in deeper and more lasting ways? I don’t pretend to know the answer. But Senator McCain has presented us with a philosophical proposition that clearly deserves our attention. The proposition is that a distinctively *civic* faith, rooted in the ideals of patriotism and personal honor, constitutes the best moral framework for public service and political action.

The proposition has many supporters. In *The Weekly Standard*, William Kristol and David Brooks endorse McCain’s “basic innovation” in which he seeks in the Republican Party to “redirect a religiously based moral conservatism into a patriotically grounded moral appeal.” McCainism thus offers “a conflation of religion and patriotism” such that “when John McCain starts talking about religious faith, he ends up talking about patriotism.” And: “When McCain talks of remoralizing America, he talks in terms of reinvigorating patriotism.” The editors of *The New Republic* similarly praise McCain’s “crusade to reform the GOP,” especially his goal of “reconstituting” the party philosophically around the principle of “moralism,” but a moralism that is “defined patriotically, not religiously.”

To understand what this “reconstitution” might mean, read McCain’s best-selling memoir, *Faith of my Fathers*, in which he repeatedly stresses his fundamental commitment to “the sanctity of personal honor,” calling it “the only lesson my father felt necessary to impart to me.” For military men such as the McCains, the “demands of honor” are “not necessarily as many as those required of clergy,” but they must be strictly embraced. And what are they? Do not lie, steal, or cheat. Keep your word. Do not shirk your duty. Admit mistakes forthrightly. Trust your comrades. Protect those for whom you are responsible.

Religion occasionally enters the discussion — the U.S. military’s Code of Conduct for American Prisoners of War states that “I will trust in God and in the United States of America” — but usually only briefly and in ways that, as Kristol and Brooks approvingly point out, morph religion into patriotism. In essence, the “demands of honor” concern personal conduct guided by patriotic duty.

*In prison, where my
cherished independence
was mocked and
assaulted, I found my
self-respect in a shared
fidelity to my country.
All honor comes with
obligations. I and the
men with whom I
served had accepted
ours, and we were
grateful for the privi-
lege.*

John McCain,
Faith of my Fathers

I admire this code. I am thankful that it guides our military. And as we begin to reflect on the overall meaning of the Clinton presidency, I certainly understand the appeal of anyone in public life who seems genuinely to care about truth-telling and personal integrity. But the “sanctity of personal honor” as the ethical grounding for U.S. politics? I’m afraid not.

First, and with due respect to the Founders, who put much store in their “sacred honor,” I cannot see how honor is necessarily “sacred” or intrinsically linked to “sanctity.” Honor has two main meanings. It can refer to public reputation, or respect paid by others. As in: We honor you. It can also refer to personal fidelity to a code of conduct. As in: You behaved honorably. Sanctity means holiness or godliness. There is no logical or necessary conjoining of honor and sanctity. Indeed, these two ideals are frequently in the sharpest possible conflict with one another.

Murderers and thieves can behave honorably — that is, according to a strict code of conduct, such as a code of silence or a code of “respect” or “family honor.” Fascism has its code of honor, as does communism. Indeed, anthropologists tell us that many societies and subcultures in human history have tended to orient behavior, especially male behavior, around notions of honor and shame. Such codes often generate high levels of conflict and violence.

In our own society, honor-shame codes have been important (and probably under-appreciated) influences. In the U.S. antebellum South, for example, according to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, the ideal of “Southern honor” significantly reinforced secessionism and helped shape the Southern rationale for civil war. Elijah Anderson brilliantly describes the honor-shame code — Anderson calls it the “code of the street” — that shapes the behavior of many young African American men today in our most troubled inner cities. The code says: If you disrespect me, I will hurt you. A century and a half ago, similar “demands of honor,” equally linked to violent outcomes, guided the behavior of many young American males; it was called the “code of the West.”

Often, the code of honor is closely linked to the male’s desire for fame and glory, typically achieved through military heroism or other displays of bravery and physical strength. This particular conception of honor runs deep in Western civilization, and goes way back. It was essentially how the Greeks and Romans understood the term. In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, in arguably the most stirring speech about honor in the English language, King Henry, about to lead his men into battle, confesses to them: “But if it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive.”

The relevant point for us, however, is that Henry knows that it *is* a sin to covet honor. For people with religious faith — for those who seek after sanctity or godliness — coveting honor is a sin because honor can never be an end in itself. Honor is not a free-standing ideal. It must always depend for its ultimate meaning on something larger than honor.

Honor for whom and for what purpose? For me? For my group? For the state? Honor by itself cannot answer this question. Honor is a path, but honor by itself cannot tell us where the path is leading.

For this reason, the Bible does not speak much of honor as a life goal or as a way of living. The Book of Proverbs tells us that “before honor is humility.” The

fourth commandment — Honor your father and mother — immediately domesticates the notion of honor, placing it within the context of family. In this and similar ways, for the Jews, honor largely shifts from a noun to a verb, from an achievement to an offering.

In the New Testament, insofar as honor means public esteem, Jesus certainly showed little if any regard for it. He says plainly: “I receive not honor from men.” He also chastises those who “receive honor from one another” yet “seek not the honor that comes from God only.” And insofar as honor implies a code of conduct which refuses to suffer slights, Jesus regularly and frontally offends against its demands. As in: Turn the other cheek.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a long book, which includes an extensive discussion of the virtues, but it contains hardly a mention of honor. Discussing the eighth commandment — Do not bear false witness — the catechism does briefly define honor as “the social witness given to human dignity.” Understood in this sense, honor is a good to which all persons have a natural right, since all persons, as children of God, possess dignity. But notice again the subordination of honor to something that is bigger than honor and that gives honor its direction.

Indeed a major cultural achievement of Judaism and then Christianity was to challenge the primacy of honor-shame codes as guides for behavior, offering instead a newer ethic of humility, charity, and obedience to God. No longer, then, would greatness refer only or even mainly to kings and military leaders pursuing glory through rule and conquest. The new idea is that greatness means godliness and therefore “comes from God only.” The new idea transforms honor. It chastens patriotism. It also helps make democracy possible.

Why? Because recognizing the differences between civic honor and godliness, between patriotism and religious faith, turns out to be an essential cultural underpinning for the practice of self-governance. For in a democracy, the degree to which independent moral truth trumps civic pride rather than the other way around — the degree to which our morality is defined religiously rather than patriotically — is exactly the degree to which politics is relativized and the claims of the state are limited. In this way, government operates under, and draws legitimacy from, a moral canopy that is not of its own making.

This moral grounding for our democracy is essential. As a result, whenever we conflate faith and honor, whenever our morality degenerates into mere patriotism, we threaten a foundation of democracy. Guys like Lt. Colonel Oliver North, strutting around the Reagan White House a few years ago in his uniform, convinced that he was strong while Congress was weak, and that his code of honor permitted him to subvert the will of Congress in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, never figured this out.

Honor as the basis of our politics? Define our morality “patriotically, not religiously?” I’m afraid not.

William Kristol and David Brooks, “The Politics of Creative Destruction,” The Weekly Standard, March 13, 2000. Editorial, “Stay and Fight,” The New Republic, March 27, 2000. John McCain, Faith of my Fathers (New York: Random House, 1999), 167, 66-67, 240. David D. Gilmore, Manhood in the Making: Cultural Conceptions of Masculinity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University

What is left when honor is lost?

Publilius Syrus,
Sententiae

*Honor is a mere
scutcheon. And so ends
my catechism.*

Shakespeare,
Henry IV

Press, 1982). Elijah Anderson, Code of the Street (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999). The Bible, Proverbs 15:33, John 5: 41, 44. Catechism of the Catholic Church (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 595. Don S. Browning, et. al., From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 141-147. A version of this essay appeared in The Weekly Standard, April 10, 2000.

Protesting

In letter six (Fall 1999), wondering why the “Anglo societies now bestriding the world like a colossus also lead the world in nearly every measurement of family disintegration,” I did some hand-wringing about the possible family-weakening effects of “Protestant individualism.” Dr. LuAnn Craik of Yorba Linda, California, begs to differ: “Today, it is the evangelical Protestant denominations that focus on preserving marriage, promoting sexual abstinence outside of marriage, and decrying divorce. The Protestant churches in my community are strongly committed to the family and to using Scripture as their basis for moral living. While it is true that ‘individual decisions’ on the part of Protestants to receive or reject Christ are just that, individual decisions, the Protestant Christian life that I am familiar with, and try to lead myself, cannot be accurately characterized as individualistic or isolationist. The emphasis is on the community of believers, supporting one another, and holding each other morally accountable. Surely the fact that individualism is rampant in the U.S. today is less attributable to the influence of Protestantism than it is to the lack of acknowledgement of a Higher Power in general.

You also imply that tradition may be more important than truth. If that’s the case — if we must essentially rely on our customs to keep us warm — then the truth-seeking and often dissenting individual has no place in a religious community built upon tradition. But if tradition is to outweigh truth, than what of Martin Luther and of your Protestantism and mine?”

I agree that many Protestant evangelicals today are leading the good fight for marriage and civil society, and striving in their own lives with much success to maintain strong families and strong communities of piety and faith. I agree that secularism is a stronger ally of individualism than is Protestantism. And yes, there is so much that is precious in “your Protestantism and mine,” including the respect which this tradition often accords to the “truth-seeking and often dissenting individual.” I think of John Bunyan: “Hobgoblin nor foul fiend can daunt his spirit; He knows he at the end shall life inherit. Then fancies fly away; he’ll fear not what men say; He’ll labor night and day to be a pilgrim.”

There is much beauty and truth here. Yet it seems clear that the Protestantism, centered as it is on individual choice and especially on the individual conversion experience, is essentially a modern way of living. The tilt is toward the centrality of the individual and away from tradition, fixed structure, and inherited authority. Dr. Craik’s suggestion that we frequently find truth by opposing tradition, as if the two tend typically to conflict, strikes me as a good example of Protestantism’s epistemological bias toward individualism.

Noting that “Christianity in the United States was always more individualistic and pietistic than in Europe,” George M. Thomas, in his study of U.S. revivalism in the 19th century, describes “individualism” as one of Protestant revivalism’s “dominant characteristics.” For example, Thomas argues that Protestant revivalism helped to transform “the patriarchal family . . . recasting intergenerational family ties in voluntaristic, individualistic terms.” Here is the noted scholar Seymour Martin Lipset: “American Protestantism, with its emphasis on the personal achievement of grace, reinforced the stress on personal achievement which was dominant in the secular value system.” This way of living surely has many strengths. But it also has weaknesses.

Seymour Martin Lipset, The First New Nation (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), 183.

George M. Thomas, Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 66-67, 87.

John W. Miller (professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) *replies*: “It is true that Protestantism fosters individual decision making, and in some forms more than others, such as in those denominations, for example, which ascribe to adult baptism. But in the U.S., due to the constitutional separation of church and state, the necessity of individualism in this sense has been heightened for all religions. Absent state support, religions in this part of the world are compelled to relate freely and competitively, making all of them more attentive to individual freedoms and the necessity of choosing.

But this trend has not diminished the community aspects of American religion. Religious communities have flourished on this continent as never before, and Americans remain among the most religious peoples of the world, with strong attachments to specific religious communities. It is mistaken to see in Protestant individualism the sources for the recent disintegration of marriage and the family. Until recently, the religions of North America were in agreement about familistic values and were highly successful in propagating them.

What happened to marriage and the family in North America — and why it happened so swiftly here — is due, in my view, to a combination of five factors. The first and most important is the swift emergence of the sexual revolution in the 1960s. The second is the degree to which the religious communities were taken off guard by the depth and implications of this revolution, and were and are slow in knowing how to respond. The third is the declining authority and importance of religious communities in public debates over these matters. The fourth is the profound uncertainties of a government constitutionally bound by principles of separation of church and state in knowing what its limits and responsibilities are in addressing the consequences of this revolution. And the fifth is the degree to which a U.S.-based entertainment industry embraced the values of the sexual revolution and began propagating them aggressively within now divided and increasingly permissive political, religious and secular cultures, both here and across the world.

In 1960, there was still a strong cultural consensus in North America against sexual relations outside of marriage. Yet by the end of the decade, that consensus had evaporated. Why? Not because of Protestant individualism, but due primarily to

a radically new way of viewing human sexuality itself that was connected to the availability of contraceptives on a mass scale, especially the contraceptive pill. What we are only now realizing is that, through these developments, human societies today are facing anew the fundamental questions that gave birth to the two-parent marital family five or six thousand years ago, except that, today, the number of available individual options has increased exponentially.”

In the Cards

Noting that “today’s families are complicated,” Hallmark Cards recently released a new line of cards, “Ties That Bind,” created especially for those in “non-nuclear family relationships.” One card is for a parent who has moved away to send to a young child: “Not only do I miss you, I think about you all the time.” Another is to be sent to an older child by a stepmother or by Dad’s girlfriend: “You’ve become someone very important in my life, and I couldn’t be more proud of you if you were my own son.” The same child could send back a card that says: “You and I share a special bond that comes from loving the same wonderful person. Thanks for all you’ve done to make my dad so happy.”

One card says: “Thrown together without being asked, no chance of escape . . . and still we came out friends!” Another says: “Sometimes it’s hard to know how we all fit together . . . It’s like looking at a puzzle where the pieces aren’t where they used to be. I just want you to know that even though it’s a little confusing right now, I feel lucky to have you in my life and glad that you’re part of my world.” Another says: “I guess I don’t need to tell you that it wasn’t easy for me to accept you at first. But with time, I’ve come to know you better and I’ve grown to respect you.”

To promote these cards, special new signage in stores will direct customers to the “non-nuclear family” card section. Hallmark is also partnering, as they say, with the Stepfamily Association of America. People who buy the cards will see a display with the Association’s phone number and web address, so that they can receive “resources to help smooth transitions into new families.”

“Our trends, business and ethnographic research was combined with research from focus groups to make sure that Hallmark artists and writers are in tune with today’s new families,” says Hallmark’s manager of card strategy and innovation. The company’s media relations manager wrote to us, stressing that these cards “are quite beautiful and the messages are what consumers are asking for.”

Is she right? Part of me cannot find fault with Hallmark. Customers who don’t need or like the cards won’t buy them. And while “beautiful” is not the first word that springs to my mind, I do realize that these cards are attempting to capture sentiments of hopefulness and kindness on behalf of people in new and often difficult situations.

But for the most part, these cards make me sad. It’s like reading those books intended for the young children of divorce — yes, written for understandable reasons and with good intentions — with titles like *What’s Going to Happen to Me?* and *At Daddy’s on Saturdays*. Isn’t it a bit troubling, even to the people at Hallmark, that

these are the “messages” that “consumers are asking for?” And that these are the arrangements into which millions of our children need “smooth transitions?”

“Hallmark Earns Thumbs-Up from Stepfamily Association of America for New ‘Ties That Bind’ Cards for Today’s Non-nuclear Families,” press release, Hallmark Cards (Kansas City), November 1999. “Facts about Ties That Bind — a New Card Line from Hallmark,” Hallmark press release, December 1999. Email correspondence from Hallmark, January 31, 2000.

Going, Going . . . ? (cont.)

Many everyday occurrences that most people view as normal can strike the marriage buff — okay, me — as signs of the end of civilization. Here are three recent items.

Madonna, the singer-celebrity and mother of Lourdes, age three, has announced that she wants to have another child. Yet according to news reports, Madonna “stops short of saying who the daddy should be” and “pours water on the rumors that she may marry her boyfriend . . .” Says Madonna: “I’m just trying to have a proper relationship.” She also resents all the talk about how she “used” her former personal trainer, Lourdes’ dad, as nothing more than a “sperm donor.” Says Madonna: “When I had a baby with him, I had every intention of being with him, but things didn’t work out. I think few people have conventional family relationships.” (Madonna, please call the innovation department at Hallmark Cards.) Finally, Madonna appears on the April cover of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. The story inside sings Madonna’s praises for turning into — I am not making this up — “an old-fashioned mom.”

Should unmarried couples be permitted to adopt children who are in state custody? In Utah, State Representative Mary Carlson of Salt Lake believes that the answer should be “yes.” Put aside for a moment whether or not you agree. Listen to her reasoning: “Is the marriage license going to make them better parents? It makes no sense!” Marriage enhances parenting? To Carlson, the notion is self-evidently illogical; it simply “makes no sense.” A local pediatrician agrees, insisting that “stacks and stacks of current literature refute the argument that children raised in nontraditional families don’t turn out as well as children in traditional families.” Now that *that’s* been cleared up.

Sylvia Weishaus, a well-known therapist who specializes in helping married couples, has mapped out the six stages of a typical marriage. Stage one: Blinded by Love. Two: The Honeymoon’s Over. Three: Confusion/Kids. Four: Honey, I’m Back (The Kids Are Gone). Five: Hanging Up the Spurs (Retirement). And six: Aging Gracefully. Regarding this last stage, Weishaus says that “by the time most couples get to their 80s, the process is well completed. If it isn’t, splitting up remains an option, or living apart but within close proximity.” In case things don’t work out.

Bill Hoffman, “She wants to be ‘ma’donn-again,” New York Post, February 2, 2000. Liz Smith, “Madonna Grows Up,” Good Housekeeping, April 2000. Dennis Romboy, “Two adoption bills face opposition,” Desert News, January 27, 2000. Elaine Moyle, “Marriage has six stages,” Toronto Sun, November 23, 1999.

. . . from the looks of it, a great mother. Hats off to you, Madonna.

Letter to the Editor,
People, April 3, 2000.

*Madonna’s Surprise:
I’m Pregnant*

People, April 3, 2000.

What We Need

The *Wall Street Journal* is fretting that the economy is running out of workers. Unemployment is so low that employers are now busily reaching out to anyone and everyone: students, the physically disabled, people with spotty work records, at-home mothers. *Especially* at-home mothers.

In this regard, Martin Feldstein, the Harvard economics professor and former chairman of President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisors, recently took to the *Journal's* op-ed page to defend George W. Bush's tax proposal, which Feldstein helped to develop. For Feldstein, the key virtue of the Bush plan is that it would lower marginal tax rates. For lower marginal rates "change behavior" in ways that "induce people to work and earn more."

Which people? All people, of course, but especially married mothers, who are "particularly sensitive to lower rates, responding with higher labor-force participation rates and greater average hours of work per week." That's why the Bush plan would create a special tax break for the second earner in a two-earner married couple — an incentive specifically intended to reduce the number of one-earner couples and increase the number of two-earner couples.

I see. We have more money today than we ever could have imagined, largely because more people are working longer hours than ever before. Meanwhile, families are getting weaker and parents are spending less time with their children. Therefore, what the country needs is a plan to get more parents out of the home and into the labor force.

Martin Feldstein, "Bush's Tax Plan Is Even Better Than the Campaign Says," Wall Street Journal, March 28, 2000.

Ads Up (cont.)

One of today's most remarkable trends is the growing saturation of all aspects of daily life by commercial advertising. In the old days — that is, about two hours ago — advertising was extensive, but it stayed within certain generally recognized (albeit gradually expanding) boundaries. Television and the radio. Building signs and highway billboards. Newspapers, magazines, and junk mail. Wasn't that about it?

That world is over. In the new world, advertisers insert ads into every nook and cranny of life. No nook is off limits, no cranny is too small. Ads go everywhere and mediate everything.

You get in one of those new elevators, and you see a TV-like box that is showing you local weather conditions (weren't you just *in* the weather?) along with ads. You are standing in line with your child to buy tickets at one of those game-and-ride parks, and just above your head is a TV showing you ads, including ads about what you can buy at a gift shop located ten feet away from you. You rent a movie video for your kids and turn on the VCR. Then (unless you're a fast-forward buff) you watch a minimum of 15 minutes of advertising before "Our Feature Presentation."

You are sitting in an airport, waiting for your flight, trying to read a book. But you can't concentrate. Because less than ten feet away from *every single seat in the airport* is a monitor attached to the ceiling showing you news headlines and ads. You then board the plane, where you find another monitor plopping down right in front of your seat — one monitor per passenger — to show you videos and ads.

Then you get off the plane and go to the baggage area to get your bags. But you discover, if you happen to be in Honolulu, Dallas, or New York, that airports now display advertisements on their revolving baggage carousels. Carrosell, the company pioneering this idea, recently announced that it is close to signing deals with a number of other airports. "We get a captive audience," brags Carrosell's president and chief executive. People need their bags. They have no choice but to stand there, looking at the carousel. Passengers must often wait 15 to 20 minutes, enough time to watch a single ad roll by at least eight times.

You get on one of those new exercise machines. But "you may see an E-Zone personal entertainment system attached to each piece of aerobic equipment. It is a six-inch television screen with CD and tape player and its own advertisements all in one. It enables advertisers to make pitches to, and keep track of, exercising consumers whose attention is undivided."

Here are some other nooks into which ads now insinuate themselves. ATM machine transactions. Gasoline pump handles. Video monitors perched above gasoline pump handles. Plastic bags used to cover dry cleaning. Little stickers on apples and other pieces of fresh fruit. Parking meters. Restaurant restrooms. Portable toilets. Golf course locker rooms. Handles of golf clubs and baseball bats. Little stickers on or accompanying highway toll receipts. Cocktail napkins. Mailing envelopes. And more to come.

Rodney Ho, "Baggage-Carousel Ad Business Has Circuitous Launch," Wall Street Journal, February 15, 2000. Allison Fass, "Get Ready for Ads During the Workout," New York Times, March 6, 2000. Caroline E. Mayer, "Ads Infinitum," Washington Post, February 5, 2000.

Having Them for Life

Advertising today is extending its influence not only spatially, saturating more and more inches of cultural turf, but also ontogenetically, or as a matter of human development, primarily by bidding with increasing intensity for the loyalties of young children, including toddlers and pre-schoolers. One of advertising's newest goals, therefore, according to Wayne Chilicki of General Mills, is "getting them early and having them for life."

In 1990, according to Peggy O'Crowley of Newhouse News Service, advertisers spent a mere \$100 million on advertising to minors. This year, they will spend more than \$2 billion. Advertisers view children as an increasingly lucrative market. Children *under age 12* spent about \$28.4 billion in 1998. Overall, direct spending by minors has tripled since 1990. Not to mention the growing billions of dollars of parental purchases each year that are at least partly determined by children's pleas and whines. Children spend about 40 hours per week outside of school plugged into television and other entertainment media, courtesy of which they encounter an

But in an \$8.5 million dollar deal that may well foreshadow the corporate renaming of a host of Broadway houses, the nonprofit Roundabout Theater Company is rechristening the venerable Selwyn Theater on 42nd Street the American Airlines Theater.

New York Times, March 1, 2000.

Advertising is a type of curriculum — the most persuasive in America today.

Gary Ruskin
Mothering magazine.

estimated 40,000 advertisements per year. Researchers report that 3-year-olds today are typically capable of recognizing up to 100 brand names.

In furtherance of this trend, the Institute for International Research and *Parenting* magazine recently hosted a conference for corporate marketers called “Play-Time, Snack-Time, Tot-Time: Targeting Preschoolers and Their Parents.” The conference’s introductory theme was “KGOY” — “Kids Getting Older Younger.” Which led to discussions such as “Preschoolers — The New Marketing Target?” and sessions such as “New media for 0-3: TV, the Internet, and more.”

One workshop presented “anthropological research” techniques that can help marketers “find out the desires of toddler age consumers.” For it turns out that “moms, dads, and grandparents are often unaware” of what young children “really need.” But research “allows you to identify their ‘real’ needs and motivations” in order to “develop products that answer these desires.”

If all of this sounds disturbing, consider the finale. The conference chairperson was Susan Royer, Vice President of Sesame Street Research at the Children’s Television Workshop. The people from *Sesame Street* even ran a workshop called “A Behind The Scenes Look At The Creation of Elmo’s World”: “Elmo’s World is a 15 minute show within *Sesame Street* that has preschoolers glued to the television.” Workshop participants learned “the strategic implications a strong brand has on producing a new product.”

What does it mean when the Children’s Television Workshop, which presents itself as the embodiment of child-friendly, non-commercial television, actively helps corporate advertisers to “target” preschoolers for their product pitches? To me, it means that they have gone over to the Dark Side.

Gary Ruskin, “Why They Whine,” Mothering, November-December 1999. Peggy O’Crowley, “Backlash builds against ads that target children,” MSNBC.com, March 8, 2000. Conference brochure for “Play-Time, Snack-Time, Tot-Time: Targeting Preschoolers and Their Parents,” March 13-14, 2000, Institute for International Research (New York, NY).

You Get the Sofa

In a new TV ad, we see a little child begging a grown-up for a toy. Then we see a new Toyota. The announcer says: “Little kids get what they want. Shouldn’t you?” In a new magazine ad from Montauk, a chain of furniture stores, we read: “He left me. Good riddance. He never picked up his socks. He thought I was his mother. He didn’t make me laugh anymore. He’s gone. Who cares . . . I kept the sofa.”

If an anthropologist from Mars in the year 1900 had searched U.S. society for the most influential texts and messages shaping the character of the young, the Martian would probably have returned home with a *McGuffey Reader* (“You must not lie. Bad boys lie, and swear, and steal.”), a copy of the Scout Oath, and the latest materials from the YMCA and Sunday School movements. But in the year 2000, our visiting scholar would almost certainly return home with a lot to say about advertising and entertainment connected to advertising. I believe that the alien would report that the moral philosophy of U.S. advertising is that we deserve whatever we want, that adults should break the rules, in part by acting more and more

like children, that the relationships we can trust most are relationships with certain companies, and that we can best pursue happiness and assert our individuality by buying certain products.

Smells Like Dad

Two recent studies explore the links between the age at which girls reach puberty and the presence of adult males in the home. Writing last summer in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a team of five scholars looks at the factors that seem to delay the onset of puberty in girls. What are they? The presence in the home of the biological father. A father who demonstrates warmth and love. And a close relationship between the mother and father. Overall, “the quality of fathers’ investment in the family emerged as the most important feature of the proximal family environment relative to daughters’ pubertal timing.” Regarding the implications of these data, it appears that “early pubertal maturation, risky sexual behavior, and early age of first birth are all components of an integrated reproductive strategy that derives, in part, from low paternal investment.”

Why would the father-daughter bond emerge as the key factor? The researchers speculate that it may have something to do with the daughter’s exposure to her father’s “pheromones.” Pheromones are chemical substances secreted by the body that serve as stimuli to others of the same species for one or more behavioral responses. English translation: Her father’s aura slows down her sexual maturation. A related hypothesis is that “low levels of positive family relationships,” especially in conjunction with “exposure to unrelated adult males,” serve as “causal mechanisms” for earlier puberty.

Which brings us to the second study. Writing in the March/April issue of *Child Development*, two scholars (one of them, Bruce J. Ellis, was also involved in the earlier study) seek to isolate the factors that speed up the onset of puberty. One is the absence of the biological father. Another is maternal depression. But even more significant is the presence in the home of an “unrelated father figure” — that is, a stepfather or mother’s boyfriend. The younger the girl at the time of the unrelated male’s arrival in the home, the earlier the onset of puberty.

What explains this finding? The presence of stepfathers and boyfriends in the home is associated with greater levels of stress, dysfunction, and interpersonal conflict. Also, we’re back again to those pheromones. For it seems that, while a father’s aura slows down the girl’s sexual development, the aura of an unrelated male has exactly the opposite effect.

Let’s sum up. If we want young girls to delay sex and childbearing, having a loving biological father on the premises is a good idea, while having unrelated men on the premises is not. The folk wisdom that we in this generation learned from our grandmothers, and then largely rejected, is looking better all the time.

Bruce J. Ellis, et. al., “Quality of Early Family Relationships and Individual Differences in the Timing of Pubertal Maturation in Girls: A Longitudinal Test of an Evolutionary Model,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 77, no. 2 (August 1999): 387-401, Bruce J. Ellis and Judy Garber, “Psychosocial Antecedents of Variation in Girls’ Pubertal Timing: Maternal Depression, Stepfather Presence, and Marital and Family Stress,” Child Development 71, no. 2 (March/April 2000): 485-501.

The sad thing is, it'll probably be the healthiest relationship of your adult life. You've tried the personals, blind dates, even those online chat rooms. Why? The Civic Sedan is smart, fun, reliable and good-looking. Not to mention, it's ready to commit, today. The Honda Civic. Looking for a good time?

Ad, Honda

The State of the Debate

A middle-aged guy with bad eating habits and a beer gut has just been told by his doctor, for the fifth or six time in the past several years, that his cholesterol is too high and that, if he continues to ignore the problem, he's in trouble. Finally the message has gotten through. Leaving the doctor's office, the guy is worried. He makes plans to go jogging. Then he gets home, feels hungry, opens the refrigerator door, and looks at . . . beer and left-over pizza. He wonders what to do. He knows that the cholesterol is a big problem, but is he prepared to give up pizza and beer? Maybe, but . . . maybe not yet.

This analogy comes from Daniel Yankelovich. As Yankelovich sees it, our society is that guy. We are currently in that tug-of-war moment of reflection, deciding whether we *will* do what we know we *should* do. This is good news. We are no longer in what psychologists call denial. We know that our families are getting weaker and our communities are getting hollower. We know especially that many of our children are suffering. Even the academics are sounding more and more . . . like our grandmothers.

But are we actually prepared to give up the devils we know — especially the right of adults to do pretty much whatever they want — in order to strengthen our seedbed institutions and improve our social morality? Perhaps. Some hopeful behavioral trends are already evident. A decline in both adolescent pregnancy and teen sexual activity. A tapering off of the divorce rate. Sharp reductions in crime.

But is genuine turnaround possible? Especially regarding everything related to sexuality and procreation, the current tendency toward libertinism seems deeply entrenched. The family trends of recent decades may be largely irreversible. So we worry. We wish for something better, especially for our kids. We make resolutions. And for dinner, we grab a beer and a slice.

Sincerely,

David Blankenhorn

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