

Ties that Bind

Ellen Wilson Fielding

One of the things that might most astonish a pre-ancient man or woman who visited our era—something at least as shocking as the automobile, antibiotics, or bikinis—is our attitude toward family life, particularly large families. Most of us, like every other generation since the dawn of time, want to marry at some point and have children. (Though that “most” is getting smaller—the most recent Census Bureau statistics show about 20% of American women in their early 40s are childless, up from 10% in 1976.) But unlike human populations in pre-modern times, most couples now think (and plan) in terms of a couple of kids. We are told that high infant and child mortality rates in pre-modern societies made the production of numerous progeny a good hedge against disease, and this is true. We are told that children were an asset in the labor-intensive world of the family farm (or cottage industry or shop), and that children constituted their parents’ security in old age, and these things are also true. We also know that, aside from completely abstaining from sexual intercourse, people seeking to restrict family size before the 20th century had only crude and often unreliable means, like coitus interruptus, primitive models of condoms and spermicides, etc. We are further told that, for poverty-stricken families, especially in non-rural conditions where children needed at least several years’ worth of expensive nonproductivity before they could be put to work, parents of large families would willingly have forgone many of their children.

The introductory plot of “Hansel and Gretel” gives us a glimpse of this darker, less family-friendly aspect of the past, as the children’s father reluctantly agrees to abandon Hansel and Gretel in the forest, because he cannot provide for them. The hygienic version we read blames the stepmother for this unfatherly act, but another version has their own mother arguing for their abandonment. And the leftover lore of the pro-abortion movement, as well as historical research, informs us that abortion, infanticide, and the sale and abuse of children have piled up corpses in other eras beside our own.

Still, it is hard to get around the fact that, both in pre-modern times and in those few remaining pockets of the globe where people live essentially “pre-modern” lives, as long as starvation and abject poverty are not threatening,

Ellen Wilson Fielding, a long-time senior editor of the *Review*, is the author of *An Even Dozen* (Human Life Press). She lives in Maryland with her four children.

children are welcomed as a good, and busy, crowded, intensely non-private family living is even *enjoyed*.

Consider how children—in large numbers—are regarded in the Old Testament, for example. Jacob's beloved wife Rachel wishes to die because she has borne him no children (and this is not a dynastic problem, because her sister Leah has already produced several male heirs for Jacob by then). When her prayers are answered, she delights in the birth of first Joseph and then Benjamin. We know that sterility represented to the Jews (and many other peoples) a sign of divine disfavor, but perhaps we don't consider the implications of the reverse—that being blessed with many children was a sign of being, well, blessed. It was a gift, a God-given favor, an enriching as indicative of the goodness of Creation and the Creator as abundant harvests or nets teeming with a catch of fish. “Happy the man who has his quiver full” of sons, says the psalm, and “your children [are] like olive plants around your table” says another. Consider that, in all other contexts except that of human reproduction, “fertility” and fruitfulness have only positive connotations. In contrast to sterility and barrenness, it is a sign of life, health, growth, promise. (Interestingly, it is only about a century and a half ago that we began developing a parallel positive definition of sterility, with the discovery of germs.)

Well, in the culture of the Old Testament (and almost all other cultures the world has seen), even reproductive fertility was a blessing. The sign of the Messianic age was that “the barren wife will bear seven sons.” One of the indicators of Job's prosperity both before he is visited with misfortune and after the restoration of his riches is a very large family. When we consider the amount of sheer hard labor exacted by even a small family before the machine age—weaving, sewing, hand-washing, drawing water, cooking, baking, preserving, and on and on and on, it is incredible to realize that, even so, additions to the family were welcomed as blessings, except when plague or famine or extreme poverty threatened the lives of all.

Why? Which is the same as asking, “Why isn't this the case today, outside of small pockets of countercultural traditionalists?” In a world of plenty and convenience beyond the dreams of ancient populations, what makes the idea of plentiful children so unappealing to prosperous populations?

We have heard lots of the proposed answers, and once again, it is hard to argue against their accuracy as far as they go. For example, money. Nowadays children commonly don't contribute financially to the family; on the contrary, they are enormous money pits compared to earlier generations and simpler societies, because of the extension of their education and the postponement of adulthood. Once they are adults, children (ideally) find employment,

but instead of pooling their resources with other family members, they move out on their own. This means no more major child-related expenses for the parents (except in cases of illness, unemployment, or incapacitation), but also no influx of money—and often limited emotional support or physical assistance. Far from being seen as an act of desertion, however, this distancing is often welcomed by both parties, since independence and self-reliance (on the part of both the maturing children and the aging parents) are the goals and in fact the standard for evaluating a healthy adult human life.

But this independence goes further in unraveling the ties that once bound members of traditional, “tribal” families. In healthy, “successful” modern families, siblings, parents, and children will rejoice in one another’s achievements and sympathize when things go wrong, but the extent to which each feels his reputation or value diminished or enhanced by what a family member does is much reduced from what it was in a more tribal society, particularly when adult children may live and work and socialize at a great distance from siblings and parents. Except for a few very high-profile cases, where publicity creates a global village to stand in for the traditional one, an individual family member’s economic circumstances or social standing may soar or plummet without greatly affecting the economic circumstances or social standing of parents and siblings.

Because this is the case, and because independence and individualism are so highly prized, children make the important life decisions about what they will do for a living, where they will live, and most significantly, whom they will marry not judged by the criteria of family needs, alliances, or interests, but by those of personal needs and self-fulfillment. This means that extended family households that are not entered into out of urgent necessity (such as a parent with Alzheimer’s, an ill or unemployed child) are relatively rare, and it is just such extended families that once helped relieve the parental burden of caring for many children.

So all of these contemporary factors contribute to a shift that can be sensed between the earlier world of ethnic urban enclaves, family farms, and small-town interrelatedness on the one hand, and a contemporary world of small families operating out of islands of independence from which, when the children reach maturity, colonies will sail forth, eventually to found their own small familial islands.

I don’t want to romanticize. This week’s newspaper carried one of those periodic stories about Hindu wives doused with kerosene and set ablaze because their families weren’t coughing up further installments on dowries. Others are killed or made miserable because they don’t get along with their in-laws. Not long ago many women bringing home high grades were told

that the family budget could only stretch for a son's college education, because he was the one who would have to earn a good living for his own family. Small-town families could suffer enduring humiliation and discrimination for something that one of their members did. Tightly interknit and interdependent extended families are made up of people as fallen as the rest of us, and they can ignore, misunderstand, and disregard the genuine human needs, abilities, and temperaments of their members. They can sacrifice some for the good of all, and impose their will on the legitimate choices of children or grandchildren. Many children have bent their natures to take over a family business or line of work that they were ill-suited for. The kind of support that a large, loyal family can provide for their own when the outer world is being oppositional is matched by the force such a family can bring to bear against those members attracted by a different path.

So in all times there have been people, sometimes for good reason, who chose to escape from the large family, whether nuclear or extended. However, increasingly these escapees are the *parents* of families, and not just the children. Adults postpone or limit family size, or leave to live alone or in a less encumbered state, rationing their parenthood to weekend status. Despite the stereotypes, many parents today openly relish the empty nest, and, as they age and perhaps grow feeble, often strongly resist relinquishing independence and forfeiting privacy to move in with their adult children.

So neither the traditional nor the contemporary social arrangement should be viewed sentimentally. However, the "island of independence" model has gained the clear ascendancy now, boosted in the last 40 years by birth control, no-fault divorce, the secularization of the public square, and a government that replaces financial dependency on family with the Welfare State. The earlier model is stretched financially by longer schooling, greater educational and consumer expenses, and higher taxes (a good chunk of which go to pay the kind of health, welfare, and retirement benefits once largely considered a family responsibility). And it is likely to be increasingly threatened in the next 30 or 40 years, as the proportion of elderly to wage-earners jumps and the burden of meeting the needs of the elderly crushes the ability of most working men and women even to contemplate producing a "quiverfull" of children, or permitting the mother to stay at home with them. Something like this demographic burden on society has already begun in Japan, where the fertility rate began plummeting years before ours. Now an increasing number of elderly Japanese are living in poverty; welfare payments to them were recently cut, because the Japanese state believes it cannot afford the kind of reverential care for the elderly

that was traditionally taken for granted. More ominously, many grown children are refusing to take up the slack.

So economists tell us what some of us don't want to hear, but what others accept as a face-saving excuse: today's adults can't afford large families. And psychologists and educators tell us that large families short-change the children; that the centripetal force of children's athletics and activities pulls everyone in separate directions; and that, for many children, the peer group (class-team-clique-college-gang) has replaced the family or tribe as the active unit of belonging. This does not mean that the family has no influence, or even little influence, but that it is perceived more as these distinct persons: Mom, Dad, brother, sister—rather than as a milieu, or ecosystem, or sociological unit in the more collective sense that is likely when we are talking about large numbers of siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles.

It is often the case nowadays that you care about *these people*, and not so much about “the family” as an adumbration of earlier clans or tribes. You are swayed by your father's experience or your mother's good counsel, and not, knee-jerk, by pronouncements from the paterfamilias. You negotiate insurance forms, powers of attorney and assisted living for your failing parents because you love them and feel a responsibility to repay in some measure their sacrifices for you—but you don't commonly feel the same need to deal with Great Aunt Sarah or discuss end-of-life options for Uncle Stan with the cousins.

Economics, affiliations, intrusive government—all of these play into the differences in the family's relations with society and with its individual members.

At the extreme end of contemporary politics, this has its effect on the definition of marriage and its seeming capacity to be stretched to include very non-traditional pairings such as homosexual couples. Why is it here and now that the concept of homosexual marriage can land on a state ballot or be argued before a state Supreme Court? We can point to all sorts of ancillary reasons, but at bottom it is due to the privatization of religion, marriage, and parenthood, and the depreciation of children as both the greatest gift and the greatest responsibility of a marriage.

Marriage is no longer a sound, tested, and trusted social structure for providing life, nurture and security to a couple and its members “from cradle to grave,” and often in association with extended family. It is an emotional, psychological and perhaps economic buffer against the demands and predations of the rest of the world. It is a place where we can get our needs met, including the need to be close to someone. When Robert Frost wrote the lines “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take

you in,” he meant the reluctantly spare language to nevertheless resonate within his audience as a good thing, a positive thing. He meant us to identify with the potential neediness of the home-comer, as well as the somewhat grudging acceptance of the homesteader. But judging by how few middle-aged or aging adults wish to be placed in the position of having to knock on that door, the lines convey more grim necessity than rueful acknowledgement of the human condition.

Recently we learned that the first gay couple married in Massachusetts following legalization of homosexual marriage has already separated. The two women, who had celebrated their public union only two years before, had lived together before their “marriage,” apparently in relative peace and harmony, for many years. We all know the phenomenon in heterosexual couples of a man and woman who successfully live together for several years and then, thinking it safe to take the plunge, quickly begin to unravel. What causes this, in an age that, comparatively speaking, allows spouses to retain so much individual autonomy, including the right to veto children, to decline a geographic move, to pursue a career, wear clothes the spouse can’t stand, do lunch with old friends? Of course, that very freedom is a two-edged sword, since it also includes the freedom to exit. But also, perhaps so much autonomy has made us overly sensitive to levels of social and communal engagement—to ties that bind—that would have seemed laughably, even vertiginously slight to people living in more traditional societies. Like the heroine in “The Princess and the Pea,” we are hypersensitive to the encumbering effects of a commitment—we feel the equivalent of that irritating, obtrusive lump beneath the mattress of our marital bed, and after a certain number of restless nights we begin to gather the urge to fly.

The lesbian couple in Massachusetts, like many divorcing couples, may have felt the unexpected weight of the kind of archetypal roles they had spent a lifetime sidestepping or fleeing: the pressure to be a spouse, to think in terms of “us,” not because the two individuals comprising “us” happen to be romantically involved at the moment, but because they are part of a permanent unity, something brought into being only at the point of the wedding ceremony. They may have objected to accepting not just a married present but a married future and, as the years went by, a married past together too. Their psyches may have rebelled against the very institution they had successfully gate crashed. “Mankind cannot bear very much reality,” wrote T.S. Eliot (who knew a lot about marital suffering), and marriage qualifies as maximum reality.

But back to the children, or to the empty seats where the children should be. Let’s consider the subject from the opposite angle. If a pre-modern society

were to imagine a society like ours, which possessed both the capability and the will to drastically curtail birthrates below historical norms, what would they imagine such a society to look like? How would it appear to their eyes?

This is hard to get at, but it is useful to consider from the outside what modern developed nations look like, to escape from what Chesterton termed the tyranny of the living. About 15 or 20 years ago, British detective fiction novelist P.D. James imagined a society in the early third millennium that had inexplicably ceased reproducing. In her novel *Children of Men*, she imagined a human race that suddenly, in the waning years of the 20th century, became barren. As her novel opens, the seemingly last generation of children has reached their teens and early 20s—they have all been tested and found sterile by a government obviously keenly interested in whether the human enterprise is about to fold, and preoccupied with supervising the setting sun of humanity so as to prevent or forestall social collapse and barbarism. What does this extreme version of our own minimally reproducing era look like?

It is increasingly top-heavy with the elderly, of course, and this leads to much of the book's action, as the protagonist discovers that the older folks who are removed to an apparently pleasant senior citizen existence followed by a humane exit are really being euthanized against their will, because it is both expensive and increasingly difficult to find sufficient able-bodied people to care for them.

It is also a society lacking the innocence, wonder, and sense of expectancy that accompany young children. It is a society that cannot and does not, in fact, look ahead in hope, because such hope requires the expectation or arrival of new human beings who can en flesh the future.

It is a society where little teaching goes on, because little learning occurs. There is no one to whom to entrust the cultural capital of the past, once this last generation has reached adulthood.

And this last generation, which most fully experiences the hopelessness of having nothing to build or contribute or live for to survive them, exists aimlessly, dispiritedly, unproductively, and in many cases, predatorily, in packs. They do not reverence or respect their elders, whose lives they can never, in any case, emulate. They cannot hope to nurture, protect, teach, and inspire a succeeding generation of children—a powerful motive for attempting to be your best, as parents know. Cohesiveness between generations—the family, the clan, the tribe—is non-existent. Cohesiveness within their age cohort is, like the reality show survivor contests, at bottom Hobbesian rather than generous and self-giving.

What P.D. James' exaggeration of reality shows us is that it takes a child to raise a village. It takes the challenges, needs, and innocent expectations of a child to call forth, in most people over long periods of time, a fully mature measure of generosity, selflessness, and devotion, and the acceptance of our limitations, both natural and required by the complementary requirements of others.

The Hobbesian myth is that human societies originally cohered around a social contract prompted by the need to seek safety from human and non-human predators. A social arrangement so constituted cannot rise above the tit-for-tat, I'll-scratch-your-back level of exchange, which makes it hyperalert to unfair treatment. What's needed for a society to develop the life-enhancing qualities of generosity and self-giving is an education in the proper response to the call of the truly needy and helpless, which entails a voluntary curtailment of one's freedom, a sharing of one's goods, and a lifting of the cloud of self-preoccupation.

Hobbes invents a social contract. But the family, and the tribe, and the clan are based on a covenant, an exchange of persons, a voluntary entanglement with the messy lives of others. Most of the time, these covenants have been very imperfectly entered into, very imperfectly lived out. But they remain, by and large, more life-giving and life-enhancing forms of union than a legal contract or a mere business arrangement could accomplish. A child working for his father, a slave working for his master and an employee working for his boss might all be performing the same actions, but how differently the internal emotions, motivations, personal investment, and plans for the future would animate them!

In some ways, especially as we look ahead toward imploding populations and emptying nurseries, we seem to be regressing all the way back to the original state of nature, in which, in Hobbes' famous phrase, human lives were "nasty, brutish, and short." Our cultural ideals of pleasure, comfort, self-fulfillment, prolongation of life, and prevention of pain are individualistic rather than communal. We may sense our need for solidarity with others, but we want it on our terms, for our benefit, without violating the rest of our self-involved ideals, so we construct artificial communities, invent picturesque traditions, adopt appropriate zoning and by-laws, knowing we can always move to another subdivision or another state, switch churches, jettison a relationship, find a new job, reinvent ourselves.

That is much harder to do, guilt-free, with children. Children are the baggage of past and future, obstructing the free enjoyment of our present. But they are also the only way most human beings can escape from what Milan Kundera called, in his novel of the same name, "the unbearable lightness of

being,” the disconnected individual life detached from significance beyond and outside itself.

Do we all need to acquire five or ten or fifteen children to qualify as adult members of society, so as to accept ties and limitations, liberate ourselves from self-love, and escape from that lightness of being? No, but we have to recognize unsentimentally, as a solid fact, what we may not always have the inner vitality to feel subjectively, that children are a good—which means that life is a good, which means that a life supporting and assisting and nurturing other lives is a great good. At that point, we’ll begin to align ourselves ever so slightly with the mind of our Maker, fruitful Father of a multitude of children.

