As We See It

Let's Focus On the Family

By David G. Myers

With election year politics behind us it's time for a cease-fire in our culture wars. It's time we seek a common ground in our efforts to heal America—by first agreeing that present trends imperil not only our global environment but also our social environment.

Consider these troubling facts. Since 1960:

- Child abuse reports have soared from well under a million cases annually to nearly three million.
- Cohabitation has increased sixfold. Ironically, a successful trial marriage—cohabitation followed by marriage—is a statistical predictor of later divorce.
- The divorce rate has doubled, and happiness in surviving marriages has slightly declined.
- Teen sexual activity has doubled, with accompanying increases in sexually transmitted diseases.
- The 5 percent of babies born to unwed mothers in 1960 has quintupled to more than 27 percent. Increasingly, everywhere in America, children are having children.
- In 1960 one in ten children did not live with two parents. Today, nearly three in ten do not.

This family meltdown recently caused American Psychological Association members to rate "the decline of the nuclear family" as today's number one threat to mental health. The United Nations concurred in declaring 1994 the International Year of the Family. Moreover, family decline since 1960 is compounded by other disquieting social trends: the doubled delinquency rate, the tripled teen suicide rate, the quadrupled rape rate, and the quintupled violent crime rate.

Although poverty breeds hopelessness, the end of our economic recession will likely not arrest our social recession. Most Americans believe that more money would boost their morale. But consider: since 1960 our per-person income, adjusted for inflation, has nearly doubled. Today we, therefore, have more of all that money buys, including twice as many cars per capita. Yet we're slightly *less* likely to report feeling "very happy" and *more* likely to suffer depression. Vice President Gore is right: "The accumulation of material goods is at an all-time high, but so is the number of people who feel an emptiness in their lives."

Bertrand Russell once said that the mark of a civilized human is the capacity to read a column of numbers and weep. Can we weep for all the crushed lives behind these numbers? Can we weep for the children who are the social recession's casualties? Yale psychologists Edward Zigler and Elizabeth Gilman report a consensus among researchers: "In the past 30 years of monitoring the indicators of child well-being, never have the indicators looked so negative."

As the political debate over family values subsides, can these facts foster a new consensus? Can we agree that family-supportive policies will encourage *both* family-friendly workplaces *and* the ideal of two parents committed to each other and to their children? Can we agree that we aren't returning to the "Father Knows Best" world of the fifties? That we now value intimate companionship and equality? That we can accept family diversity and support single parents while acknowledging the evidence that children benefit when jointly nurtured by two caring parents?

This social ideal—of *two adults committed to each other and to the nurture of their children*—unites most Americans, whether entering a first marriage or a second, whether supporters of the ACLU or the American Family Association, whether admirers of Bill and Hillary Clinton or of Dan and Marilyn Quayle. Recognizing that this simple ideal is decreasingly modeled by the media and practiced by the populace, family advocates, left and right, are discovering a common agenda: Sound the alarm—the two-parent family and its children are in trouble.

If this "new familism" is to become a transforming social movement, it must split off two divisive issues—abortion and gay rights—for which "family values" have so often been code words. A post-election mailing from Focus on the Family psychologist James Dobson offers "a list of family-related issues that will receive high priority early in the Clinton administration." The first five issues: (1) "The Freedom of Choice Act [permitting] no limits on the killing of unborn babies." (2) "The abortifacient RU-486 may be legalized in the United States." (3) "The use of aborted fetuses for medical research may be authorized by the new president." (4) A " 'litmus test' for federal judges, especially candidates for the U.S. Supreme Court, insisting that they be pro-abortion." (5) "Highly significant changes are likely in the arena of what is called gay rights."

To judge from these top five issues, Dobson has lost his focus on the family. So it would also seem from a post-election mailing by Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, which begins by warning that "President-elect Bill Clinton has promised to pass laws giving homosexuals special rights and making it legal to kill an unborn baby up until birth." While such issues merit continuing debate, they are, for the new family movement, lethal distractions. They are issues that divide rather than unite.[1]

To form a strategic alliance, people of diverse opinion must focus on their shared concerns. Let the abortion and gay rights debates continue but in different arenas. If child and family advocates, left and right, could focus on the *family*—on supporting parents in staying together and nurturing their children—they could exert compelling political and moral force.

Where do we begin? The problems are many and their solutions complex. Yes, reforms in health care, family economics,

education, and gun ownership will help. But first there must come an awakened consciousness. In the late 1970s, with 37 percent of high school seniors reporting marijuana use within the previous month, America awoke to its drug problems. We undertook drug education programs, and our media reversed their images of drug use. *Voilà!* By 1991, marijuana use dropped to 14 percent of seniors. "Change the way people think," said South African civil rights martyr Steven Biko, "and things will never be the same."

Beyond an aroused awareness, a new communitarian consciousness will balance individual rights with collective rights, personal gain with the common good, me-thinking with we-thinking. Growing numbers of social scientists are questioning America's individualism, reflected in the self-indulgences of both the left ("If it feels good, do it") and the right ("Greed is good"). As the collapse of communism shows the failure of extreme collectivism, so America's social recession shows the failure of extreme individualism. Commercial freedom, devoid of social responsibility, exploits people and environments. Personal freedom, devoid of commitment, corrodes the social fabric. Thus the new consciousness will heed Al Gore's call for a spiritual perspective that sees beyond our short-term personal gratification to our long-term connections with the earth, with its creator, and with each other.

The healing of America must also engage our entertainment media and schools. Today's parents often feel overwhelmed by the culture—by the behavior standards modeled by Madonna, Ninja Turtles, and the soaps. Our public values undermine our private family values, notes Marian Wright Edelman. And the more irresponsible the media become, the more we excuse them by telling parents to create an alternative culture by screening the music, movies, and TV bombarding their children.

If the drug crisis could trigger a national resolve that has reached from the schools of Peoria to the studios of Hollywood, can today's social crisis do likewise? Our new President hopes for as much when "asking the entertainment community to reexamine itself.... Help us write the future. . . . There's no question the cumulative impact of this banalization of sex and violence in the popular culture is a net negative for America. . . . Historically, artists elevated humanity, they didn't debase life."

The Republicans were unable to ignite this spiritual and social transformation. Viewing Dan Quayle as a right wing lightweight, people reacted to his family values crusade with a collective denial of our national dysfunction. Will the new Democratic leadership fare better? As a Republican (Richard Nixon) could establish relations with the Chinese communists without public outcry, will the Clinton-Gore quartet do what Bush and Quayle could not—credibly use the White House bully pulpit to focus attention on the family? If they succeed, aided by our urging and support, they will earn the gratitude of us all, Democrats and Republicans alike.

Footnote to "Let's Focus on the Family":

1. There are three reasons why the gay rights movement does not threaten the nuclear family: (1) Varying attitudes toward homosexuality haven't noticeably affected the rate of homosexuality. Whether a culture condemns or condones it, homosexuality survives and heterosexuality prevails. (2) The accumulating evidence indicates that sexual orientation is not a choice. With sexual orientation as with handedness, a relative few people are naturally predisposed one way, most another. (3) Careful, recent surveys in Europe and America all find a homosexuality rate of only 2 to 3 percent [roughly 4 percent among men and 1 percent among women]. Although the number of homosexuals—or left-handers—is irrelevant to issues of human rights, the numbers can reassure conservatives that today's more tolerant, out-of-the-closet attitudes have not increased the underlying rate of homosexuality.

Reflections on El Salvador

By James V. Brownson

Two weeks ago, as of this writing, I returned from El Salvador. Formulating the meaning of the trip has not come easily. How can I convey smells, noise, heat, or the ever-so-slight pause in the speaker's voice before answering a question? How can I convey the impact of living under dramatically different conditions, drinking bottled water, feeling helpless as a result of being unable to communicate effectively in a foreign language? One can *report* such things, but the effect will never be the same as the experience itself.

The experience in El Salvador, however, cries out for articulation, and the stories we heard need telling. So I offer here five brief episodes, vignettes if you will, that begin to touch upon some of the ways in which this experience has left its impression on my life.

Obscenity in the Chapel

It was the very first day of our visit to El Salvador, the very first meeting. We went to the University of Central America, to the site where the six Jesuits and two housekeepers were massacred in 1989. A woman met us who knew a great deal about the massacre, and she told us in detailed, methodical fashion the story: the movements of the battalion, the sequence of the events, a horrifying, moment-by-moment account of the whole nightmare. Some of us looked at scrapbooks of photographs that documented with a nauseating explicitness the outrage committed that night.

We left the room in silence, shaken. We walked down the sidewalk about fifty yards to the chapel to spend some quiet time in reflection. The chapel was a light, open, airy place. Like many buildings in that tropical climate, the boundaries between inside and outside were fluid. The two side walls were simply iron grate, and a slight breeze drifted through. On the front wall we saw colorful murals by one of El Salvador's leading muralists. At the front and to the left stood a memorial for the massacred Jesuits. We were informed that their bodies were buried here. A moving poem commemorating their martyrdom was etched in wood above the place where their bodies rested.

All this is still quite clear in my mind. But it is the back wall that is burned into my memory. Turning around, I saw the back wall, covered with fourteen stations of the cross. Each station is a framed line drawing, perhaps 18-by-32 inches, depicting a victim of torture and murder. Many of the bodies are stripped naked. Some are riddled with bullet holes. Some are tied up in horribly painful positions. Some are disfigured. Some still show the expressions of agony in which they died. It is a blood-chilling, deeply disturbing collection of silent witnesses to unspeakable atrocity.

My mind clutched for strategies to wrestle with the shock. My first impulse was a kind of revulsion at what appeared to be a form of Catholicism that reveled in blood and pain. What kind of perverse obsession with suffering would put such pictures in a chapel? But I quickly checked myself. These pictures represented a reality that these people had known in their personal lives. These abhorrent drawings made a powerful link between the suffer-