
Family Life and Civic Bonds: Renewing the “Very Air Our Loved Ones Breathe”

William J. Doherty

William J. Doherty is professor of family social science and director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota. A past president of the National Council on Family Relations, his books include Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility; Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times; and Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart.

We have witnessed the erosion of two central forms of human connection in the past forty years: family bonds and civic bonds. These two trends are usually not addressed together because scholars and others who are concerned about our culture tend to focus on one or the other—either family or community. Here I maintain that family engagement and civic engagement are two facets of the same phenomenon, and that they are tied to the same social forces. I argue that we must transcend the dichotomy between family life and public life that has limited our ability to address urgent needs of

both families and society, and develop a new ethic of family citizenship and community citizenship together, with families in the driver’s seat of social change. I then describe my work in the Families and Democracy Project, which aims to develop a vehicle for this engagement of families as citizens in our democracy.

The Erosion of Civic Bonds

Robert Putnam, in his contemporary classic book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*¹, has assembled forty years of data showing a decline in American’s

engagement in civic and political institutions. In the political sphere, most people are familiar with the decline in turnout for national elections since the early 1960s. But Americans also sign 30 percent fewer petitions and are 40 percent less likely to join a consumer boycott, as compared to just a decade or two ago. Parallel declines are visible in the non-political arena. Memberships in voluntary clubs and associations have been dropping at an accelerating rate. For example, in the mid-1960s, the average American attended a club meeting each month, but by 1998 the rate of monthly participation had declined by almost 60 percent. Religious participation has also fallen, although not as dramatically; the major challenge for faith institutions is getting members involved in leadership activities. The counter trend in membership organizations is shown in the increase in enrollment in national organizations such as the AARP. Putnam points out that these organizations make no requirements of their members beyond paying dues. In fact, the only increase in voluntary associations has been in these “check writing” organizations.

Using data from the DDB Needham Life Style Survey, Putnam documents a similar withdrawal from informal social ties with friends, neighbors, and relatives. In 1975, the average American entertained friends at home about fifteen times per year, a figure that dropped in half by the late 1990s. Leisure activities that involve getting organized with other people are declining. The whimsical book title ***Bowling***

Alone represents the fact that Americans bowl more often per capita than they did in the 1970s, but bowling league participation has declined dramatically.

Finally, numerous surveys reviewed by Putnam have documented the decline in civic trust, the extent to which Americans believe that others can be counted on to be honest and trustworthy. Interestingly, this trend has run parallel to an increase in tolerance of different values and ethnic backgrounds, as documented by Alan Wolfe.² Apparently we have become a more tolerant people, but a less connected and less trusting.

Why should we be alarmed about this decline in civic engagement? In addition to having a lower quality of life when our neighborhoods and communities are disengaged, there is the challenge of sustaining a democratic form of self-governance in the face of declining civic engagement. Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the mid-nineteenth century that democracy requires that citizens have certain “habits of the heart,” the values and skills of democratic citizenship. These habits are forged in the hearth of local participation in common enterprises, where face-to-face relations build the sense of trust that we can work through our problems. Political scientists call this “social capital,” which is the foundation of democratic capitalism and just governance.³

The Erosion of Family Bonds

There is a striking decline in family connections during the same period

that witnessed the decline in civic engagement. Some of this family decline is well known and will simply be noted here, as documented by the National Marriage Project's *The State of Our Unions 2002: The Social Health of Marriage in America*.⁴

- The divorce rate doubled between 1968 and 1980 and then stabilized at somewhat lower levels. Currently, about 40 to 50 percent of new marriages are expected to end in divorce.
- The out-of-marriage birth rate quintupled since the early 1960s. Now about a third of births are to unmarried parents.
- Because of these two demographic trends, there has been a major exodus of fathers from the lives of their children, with an estimated 40 percent of children not living with their biological father.

Beyond these well-known signs of eroding family bonds, I will elaborate on two less recognized and understood changes.

Decline in family time

Families spend less time together now than they did twenty-five years ago. The best-documented change is in family meals. Families have dinner less frequently. Putnam reports lifestyle data showing a one-third decline in parents who even claim to usually have dinner as a family.⁵ This decline in family dinners is being documented despite the fact that most American parents say they value family meals and

despite the fact that research evidence about their value is growing. A large national study of American teenagers found a strong link between regular family meals and a wide range of positive outcomes: academic success, psychological adjustment, and lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, early sexual behavior, and suicidal risk.⁶ On the flip side, not having regular family meals was associated with higher risks in all of those areas. A national time diary study of American families with children ages three to twelve found that time spent eating at home was a stronger predictor of academic success and psychological adjustment than time spent in any of the following activities: school, homework, athletics, arts, and religious participation.⁷ It is interesting to note how the national conversation about declining academic achievement looks nearly everywhere—at vouchers, charter schools, testing, teacher salaries, and school funding—except at the family environment that may be the most important factor of all.

The decline in family meals is related both to increased working hours for parents and to a new phenomenon that I have been studying and working on: overscheduled kids and under-connected families. Over the past twenty years, frantic families have become the norm. Children are involved in soccer, hockey, piano, boy scouts and girl scouts, baseball, football, karate, gymnastics, dance, violin, band, craft clubs, foreign language classes, academic enrichment courses, and religious youth activities.

Family life today revolves around children's activities rather than these activities revolving around the family's schedule.⁸ Lost is the idea that children are citizens of families, with responsibilities to be part of family activities that don't directly revolve around their personal interests.

Researchers are beginning to examine this new phenomenon. According to a national survey conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, since the late 1970s, people in the United States have had a remarkable change in children's schedules and family activities. Children have lost twelve hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent drop in playing and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities. During the same period, time in structured sports has doubled and "passive, spectator leisure" (watching others play and perform, but not including television) increased from thirty minutes per week to over three hours. In other words, children make up their own play activities a lot less often, engage in supervised sports a lot more often, and spend a whole lot more time watching passively from the sidelines.⁹

It isn't just that children are busier; families spend less overall "quality" time together. The same survey showed that household conversations between parents and children—time for just talking and doing nothing else—have dropped nearly off the radar screen, and there has been a 28 percent decline in the number of families taking vacations. I referred previously to national surveys showing a one-third

decrease in the number of families who even claim to usually dine as a family.

This change in American family life is deep and broad, cutting a wide swath across income groups and ethnic groups in the population. (The very poor do not have the resources to be overscheduled but they face their own challenges in finding time to connect as a family.) And this change has come upon us with amazing speed. Teachers now tell of students weary from schedules that even many adults couldn't handle. A teacher from a community near Albany, New York, used strong language: "This is an abused generation," she said at a public meeting. She went on to explain that, after thirty years of teaching second graders, she has never seen children so tired and burdened from being up too early in the morning, going to bed too late at night, and being crunched in between by extremely competitive activities. And hers is a privileged, upper-middle-class community.

Given the documented decline in family time, it is not surprising that a national poll of teenagers, funded by the White House in spring 2000, found that over one-fifth of American teens rated "not having enough time with parents" as their top concern, a percentage that tied for first (along with education) on their list of worries.¹⁰ A 2003 national poll of younger children ages nine to fourteen, also gives important information about their perceptions of family time. Quoting from the report from the Center for the New American Dream,¹¹ "Only 32 percent of kids say they spend a lot of time with

their parents. Why this lack of togetherness? The parents are often too busy working, say 23 percent, while 19 percent blame it on being overscheduled with homework and school activities." The report quotes one of the respondents, Brittani, age fourteen: "My coach says, 'Dedication.' My parents say, 'Keep up the good work.' I say, 'I need a break...time to curl up with a book, play with the little kids next door, go to the mall or watch a sunset.'" Many of us adults did not experience Brittani's dilemma until we were in our thirties, when we had to manage complex work and parenting responsibilities.

I will return later to discuss a cultural factor underlying this overscheduling of children and the decline in family time, but for now I want to stress that frantic family living is a public issue, not just a private issue. When families are frazzled, they do not connect well inside the home and they do not connect well with their communities, at least off the ball field.

Marriage as a lifestyle

Underlying the historically high divorce rate is how marriage has become a lifestyle based on the famous revision of the traditional marriage vows developed in the 1970s, "for as long as we both shall love." This translates to "as long I feel loving" and eventually to "as long as it is working out for me." Although polls indicate that most Americans still hold permanent marriage in high regard, there has been a sharp upturn in the rhetoric of impermanence in the past thirty years, which I have documented in my book

Take Back Your Marriage.¹² Some of this rhetoric appears in the offices of marital therapists (I have been a practicing marriage and family therapist for over twenty-five years.) Spouses nowadays are more likely to justify ending their marriages with expressions such as "It wasn't working out anymore," "We just grew apart," "We are such different people," and even "I'm bored to tears in this marriage" (the last one is used to justify the affair that eventually ends the marriage).

Advertisers know a cultural trend when they see one, and are quick to use the impermanence of the marriage lifestyle to appeal to consumers. A magazine ad pictures a new Honda Civic with the headline, "The sad thing is, it'll probably be the healthiest relationship of your adult life." Honda explains: "You've tried the personals, blind dates, even one of 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 ad ends in the wink of a headlight: "Looking for a good time?"

Apparently we must seek "healthy adult relationships" with cars because, as an ad for Levi's jeans has recognized, marriage can't be counted on anymore. In a lavish six-page spread we see happy dating couples, with captions announcing how long they were together before breaking up. The final page shows two female roommates, one consoling the other about a recent breakup. Just behind the two roommates, on the kitchen wall, is an art poster with the Spanish words, *Mis padres se divorcian*: "My parents are

divorced.” The caption underneath delivers the ad’s take-home message: “At least some things last forever—Levi’s: they go on.”

The impermanence of marriage is perhaps most powerfully documented by the increase in prenuptial agreements, even for first marriages. *Time* magazine had a major story on “Bridal Vows Revisited.” The article described the trend for more couples to have prenuptial agreements. Even people who don’t have many current assets want to protect their future assets. The article recounted the experience of Adam and Cindy, whose prenuptial contains what is called a “sunset clause,” or more bluntly, a “poison pill.” It involves an easy severing of financial ties in the event of an early divorce. The poison pill dissolves after a certain number of years when the couple “assume they are married for keeps.”¹³

In the same *Time* magazine article is the story of Janna, age thirty, a public-health educator in San Francisco, and her partner Sebastian, who have lived together for nine years. She told *Time*, “I don’t strive for permanent. That’s the end. I’m more interested in the process. Will we make each other happy every day?” She does go on to qualify the last statement by laughing and noting, “Obviously, you’re not going to make each other happy every day.” Sebastian sees things the same way: “We think, how do I treat this person with respect now? Not, how do I work out this problem because we gotta make this last forever?”¹⁴

Social criticism of impermanence in marriage comes from commentators on

both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Noting the proliferation of television shows like *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized about “the dominant view of marriage today: less a partnership than a joint venture between two parties concerned with preserving their own autonomy.”¹⁴ In a similar vein, liberal sociologist Arlie Hochschild observed that the new American lifestyle, rootlessness, occurs on a global scale. “We move not only from one job to another, but from one spouse—and sometimes one set of children—to the next. We are changing from a society that values employment and marriage to one that values employability and marriageability.”¹⁵

What is lost in the world of marriage as a personal lifestyle is the idea of citizenship in one’s marriage, which comes with the responsibility to maintain and grow the marriage even if it is not meeting one’s immediate needs. Ironically, there is growing research support for a citizen ethic in marriage. Researcher Paul Amato has shown that focusing on “how is this going for me?” leads to less satisfaction with the marriage in the future than an attitude that is focused on commitment to the relationship.¹⁶

Thus far I have argued that there has been a decline in civic engagement and in family and marriage bonds. Along the way, I introduced the notion of children as citizens of their families and married people as citizens of their marriages. Now I want to more directly address the link between family life and civic life.

Invasion of Consumer Culture and Marketplace Values

Free-market capitalism has given the modern world a plethora of rewards, including the highest standards of living in human history and unprecedented freedom of movement to pursue our goals. A good case can be made for free-market capitalism as essential for modern democratic government to function.¹⁷ What's more, there is no viable substitute, with state socialism having decisively failed to deliver on its promises. But a major problem arises when we allow the free-market capitalism, which is an economic model based on individual self-interest, to invade the intimate sphere of marriage and family life.

As I argued in my book *Take Back Your Kids*,¹⁸ parenting has become a form of product development in the contemporary world, with parents anxious to provide opportunities for their children in a competitive environment. I believe that this phenomenon underlies much of the overscheduling of children and the decline in family time and family rituals. We used to buffer our children from serious competition until high school. Now it occurs at preschool levels, with middle-class parents competing to get their children into the best preschools and even hiring tutors for their toddlers. I know six-month-old babies who are in three classes per week—swimming, music, and a foreign language! When asked to explain why their six-year-old practices four days a week in soccer, parents

reply that they want their child to have a chance to compete when they are twelve years old, and to be well-rounded for college in the future. These concerns are fed by the colleges themselves and by sports and other activity leaders who define "commitment" as full engagement in the team, whatever the cost to family life and to children's opportunity to hang out and entertain themselves.

The anxious culture of today's parenting can also be seen in the decline of confident limit-setting among parents, a phenomenon apparent to every teacher and counselor I have ever talked to—and to most grandparents! Parents increasingly have difficulty saying "no" and meaning it. They are reluctant to insist that their children come to dinner and eat from the common food. Parents say they want their children to be "happy," but end up scheduling them like CEOs and then letting them rule family life—which, of course, makes the children unhappy. In the end, parents come to see themselves as service providers to customer children—the consequence of market thinking applied to parenting.

It's the same with marriage. We now have "consumer marriage," in which we feel we deserve the most and expect to bend the least. Although most married people also embrace the values of commitment and perseverance, there are powerful voices in their social environment emphasizing self-interest. I have talked to many spouses whose parents or friends urge them to leave their marriages after hearing

complaints about the marriage—complaints not about abuse and infidelity but about the common problems of marriage such as inadequate communication, feeling unsupported in a personal crisis, and differences over money or child rearing.

To repeat, my concern is less with consumer culture in the marketplace than with how we have allowed the consumer culture to become our teacher about family relationships. Consumer culture tells us that we never have enough of anything we want, that the new is always better than the old—unless something old becomes trendy again. It teaches us not to be loyal to anything or anyone that does not continue to meet our needs at the right price. Customers are inherently disloyal. I want to support American workers but have always bought Japanese cars because I see them as superior to American cars for the price. I eat Cheerios for breakfast every day, but if the price gets too much higher than Special K, my second choice, I will abandon Cheerios. Or if General Mills changes the recipe for Cheerios, I am prepared to jump ship. I owe nothing to market producers except my money, which I can stop giving at any time. I owe everything to my family, even during periods when they don't meet my needs well enough, and even when they change without consulting me. To turn a biblical phrase, the trick is to render unto Adam Smith that which belongs to Adam Smith, and to the family that which belongs to the family.

The consumer culture has also colonized the domain of civic engagement.

We Americans are less loyal to our neighborhoods and communities than in the past; we move where there are jobs and where we can afford to live. Who asks nowadays whether you should not move because the neighborhood or your local church needs you? We live where we can meet our personal and family needs. We are less loyal to particular religious denominations and congregations; we shop for the best religious experience.¹⁹ When it comes to participation in other civic associations, the consumer question is "What's in it for me?" Real citizens participate because they see their self-interest as tied inextricably to those of other citizens. Consumers do not see their interests in this way, and decline to get involved. And of course if these adults are overscheduled in their own family lives, they have less time for civic involvement, for keeping up with civic news, and even for voting. The result is that we have become a nation of active customers in the marketplace and passive clients of the state.

Our children have picked up the consumer attitude when it comes to family responsibilities. When reminded by his father to do his chore of mowing the lawn, a fifteen-year-old boy replied, "It's not my lawn." When an eleven-year-old boy failed to thank his father for a Hanukkah gift, his mother admonished him for not saying "thank you." The boy's response: "Why should I? I don't like it." These were "good kids," not problem kids, in families with loving parents, but influenced by the individualistic consumer culture. A sixteen-year-old girl was incredulous

that anyone would expect to have a common family dinner on a regular basis. With complete innocence, she asked a National Public Radio reporter, "How can we be expected to eat together at the same time if we are not all hungry at the same time?" Children have come to see themselves, under our tutelage and that of the marketplace, as consumers of parental and community services and not as citizens with responsibilities to families and communities.

Even in parents' attitudes toward their children, I see the creeping language of the me-first consumer culture. In the past decade I have begun to hear parents of teenagers say things like, "What am I getting out of being a parent to this kid?" and "When I do start to get something in return?" These parents love their children but are stressed by the job of parenting. This insidious cost-benefit, consumer language leads good people to do bad things in their families and communities. An upper-middle-class father with plenty of resources tells his wife that he cannot take the stress of their sixteen-year-old daughter's behavior problems. "She is trying to tear us apart," he declares, and tells his wife that either their daughter leaves or he leaves. The daughter gets the message and moves out, returning later pregnant and on drugs. In the late 1960s, communities created runaway shelters for teens fleeing parents they thought were overcontrolling. In Minneapolis, the oldest such shelter now has more youth who are formally classified as "throwaways" from families than "runaways." The

behavior of most of these teens is not worse than in previous generations. What has changed is parents' commitment to accept long periods where their "costs" outweigh their "benefits" from the difficult job of parenting. I find it a frightening trend, fed both by an economic worldview and by a therapeutic worldview that overemphasizes the personal fulfillment of adults.²⁰

It is not surprising that in this consumer world, when a marriage breaks up, one of the parents feels free to exit from the children's lives and create a new life and a new family. I know a number of fathers who invest emotionally and financially in the children of their new wife but let go of their obligations to their own children who stay with their old wife. These men have cut their losses and moved on. And it's not just fathers. One woman told me that her mother's parting words, upon leaving the family, were that she needed to pursue her dreams in life.

That was common exit rhetoric in the 1970s, and the consumer version of it continues to this day. Elaine, a woman who suddenly left her empty but low-conflict marriage, decided to live with a friend who did not have space for Elaine's teenage daughter. Feeling rejected and abandoned, the daughter continued to live with her stepfather. When asked for an explanation of her departure, Elaine explained that she had decided she needed to start making her own needs a higher priority. She had felt "stuck" and decided to act, because life is short. In a dramatic family therapy session in which Elaine explained her actions, Elaine's

stepdaughter (her husband's child) expressed admiration for this woman who would make a decision to "go for it" to have a better life. (I felt like I was listening to a beer commercial about "going for the gusto" because "we only go around once in life.") Elaine's own daughter turned to her stepsister and quietly uttered the most powerful refutation I have ever heard in a therapy session: "But she's got kids." Elaine's jaw dropped. Shortly after this confrontation, she moved to her own apartment and took her daughter in. But a lot of damage had been done. The good news is that Elaine over time recovered her sense of responsibility and became a real mother to her daughter. The marriage did not survive, however.

It is not new to our species that people abandon their responsibilities. We are all weak at times, and all tempted. What's new is the cultural support for a my-needs-first approach to life, an invisible but powerful chemical in the air we breathe.

Of course nearly everyone believes in relationships as a pathway to happiness. However, since any particular relationship may not continue to satisfy your needs, you will be happier in life if you have the skills to end unsatisfying relationships and start new ones. This approach has merit when searching for a lifelong mate (after all, most intimate relationships break up before ending up in a marriage), but when it carries over into marriage itself, we feel compelled keep our romantic resumes up to date in case this relationship does not work out.

This tentativeness then makes the marriage less likely to work out. And when tentative commitment invades parenting, the children will feel it, will act out or become depressed, and will not be consoled by any amount of therapy we buy for them.

Toward a New Approach to Families and Community

Now I want to focus on what we can do about the erosion of family and civic bonds. We have to transcend our traditional splits between conservative solutions and liberal solutions, in favor of new thinking. I will only be able to paint this new approach with broad strokes here, and I apologize for the inevitable stereotyping of current approaches.

Conservative solutions to the fraying of family and community bonds tend to be too personal and individual. Social conservatives appropriately focus on the moral underpinnings of marriage and parenting, but often don't go far enough beyond exhortations to "do the right thing," "just say no," and "build your character." Or they assume that the task of rebuilding families can be relegated to faith communities and perhaps to character education in the schools. When addressing civic involvement, social conservatives emphasize volunteering and exemplary efforts such as the "thousand points of light" campaign, but they overlook the power of the marketplace values in shaping family life and community life. As a parent, why should I have a family dinner if another basketball practice

might help my kid win a college scholarship? Why should I get involved in public life, with endless meetings and intangible rewards, if I can earn more money by working more hours? Why should I not take a job promotion and earn more income, even it erases what little time my spouse and I now have to be together? Free-market capitalism inevitably encourages materialism in order to keep the economy growing and the customers coming. It's better for television manufacturers if preschoolers have TVs in their bedrooms (which over 25 percent do), although many of us would say that this is not a good idea for kids and families. Social conservatives rightly emphasize personal responsibility to do the right thing as family members and citizens, but they under-appreciate how the marketplace that conservatives admire has colonized the intimate and civic spheres of life.²¹

Liberal solutions, for their part, emphasize the role of government and professionals in fostering family and community well-being. As useful as these two forces can be for some problems, liberals often talk as if social programs and professional services can solve cultural problems affecting families and communities. Like conservatives, liberals hold unacknowledged contradictions in their views. They are often libertarian when it comes to the intimate sphere of marriage and family life, portraying anyone who asserts "family values" such as the advantages of two-parent families as trying to impose arbitrary and outmoded ideas on individuals. Government in particular

should stay out of people's private lives. But liberals are proponents of large-scale government interventions in the social and economic sphere to pick up the pieces of fractured family life. Liberals don't want individuals to feel guilty about their private, lifestyle choices (such as having children outside of marriage), but they want public officials to feel guilty about not doing enough to provide economic support and child-care for families. Public accountability, if you will, but not private accountability. (Conservatives mirror this view by emphasizing private responsibility but not public responsibility.) Liberals, with their traditional emphasis on government and professional service solutions, also underemphasize what families, faith communities, and other communities can do at the local level to solve the problems of family and civic life.

Both conservative and liberal analyses make important points. We need individual responsibility and we need public responsibility. We need both a vibrant market economy and a degree of government regulation of that economy in the name of social justice. We need both personal responsibility and personal consequences, and an adequate social safety net. We must avoid unnecessary public intrusiveness into both individual freedom and market freedom. The two areas that both sides underemphasize are the importance of limiting the intrusiveness of the marketplace ethic into the family and civic spheres, and the need for a renewal of "robust citizenship"—an ethic and a set of practices for people to be active, engaged citizens of their families and

their communities.²² This new family citizenship occupies the world in between government and the marketplace. Next I describe my own efforts to bring this kind of family citizenship.

The Families and Democracy Project

In the Families and Democracy Project at the University of Minnesota, we are developing a way for family professionals to move into the community with new thinking and with a new set of public practices for working on family and community problems. This work stems from a belief that the erosion of family and civic connections are occurring too fast for professional services to catch up with, and that the professionalizing of family life has become part of the problem by turning families into passive consumers of services. We stress the importance of civic engagement to strengthen family life, the need to transcend the traditional provider/consumer model of professional service delivery, and a vision of families creating public initiatives.

Based on the Public Work Model of Harry Boyte, Nancy Kari, and their colleagues at the University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship,²³ the Families and Democracy Model has seven principles and seven strategies for implementing action initiatives.

Principles

1. Strengthening families in our time must be done mostly by families

themselves, working democratically in local communities.

2. The greatest untapped resource for strengthening families is the knowledge, wisdom, and lived experience of families and their communities.
3. Families must be engaged as producers and contributors to their communities, and not just as clients or consumers of services.
4. Professionals can play an important role in family initiatives when they learn to partner with families in identifying challenges, mobilizing resources, generating plans, and carrying out public actions.
5. If you begin with an established program, you will not end up with an initiative that is "owned and operated" by citizens. But a citizen initiative might create or adopt a program as one of its activities.
6. A local community of families becomes energized when it retrieves its own historical, cultural, and religious traditions about family life—and brings these into the contemporary world of family life.
7. Family and Democracy initiatives should have a bold vision (a BHAG—a big, hairy, audacious goal) while working pragmatically on focused, specific goals.

Strategies

We have learned to use the following strategies to ensure that an initiative flows from the Families and Democracy model instead of becoming

a traditional program or professional service, or even a traditional volunteer activity that involves people as helpers but not as productive citizens.

1. Employ democratic planning and decision making at every step.
2. Emphasize mutual teaching and learning among families.
3. Create ways to fold new learnings back into the community.
4. Continually identify and develop new leaders.
5. Use professional expertise selectively—"on tap," not "on top."
6. Generate public visibility through media and community events.
7. Forge a sense of larger purpose.

We currently have projects in seven communities working on the following issues: diabetes care, overscheduled kids and underconnected families (www.puttingfamilyfirst.info), community support for married couples, community-engaged parent education, parent-led faith formation of children, and family and community connections through music. Next I describe one of these initiatives.

Putting Family First

Putting Family First addresses the problem of overscheduled kids and underconnected families. Traditional professional approaches to this problem would focus on education of individual families through lectures and workshops, or appeals to school boards or activity group leaders to change their schedules. Instead, the Families and

Democracy approach features civic conversation and citizen action by families.

Putting Family First was created in 1999 by a group of citizens in the Wayzata school district mobilizing to take back family life from scheduled hyperactivity and competitive parenting which deplete family time and erode family connections. The democratic theory underlying this work is that the families can only be a seedbed for current and future citizens if they achieve a balance between internal bonds and external activities, that this balance has become gravely out of whack for many families of all social classes, and that retrieving family life requires a public, grassroots movement generated and sustained by families themselves.

Parents in this initiative were among the first in the nation to name a new cultural problem. They have sought and received intense media attention about the problem (the parents have appeared on virtually every major media outlet in the country), stimulated conversations all over their school district, published a "family consumer guide" to the time, travel, and financial expectations of local activity groups that schedule kids' time, and organized the faith communities to address the problem. Other communities from around the country have sought out advice from Putting Family First about taking action in their own communities. For example, Ridgewood, New Jersey, decided to sponsor Family Nights in which all local activity groups cancelled their

events so that families could have dinner together and connect through games and other activities. The big, hairy, audacious goal of Putting Family First is to stimulate a national movement of democratic parent action to take back family life from the individualistic, hyper-competitive consumer culture of childrearing. We have had success in the first step of cultural change by stimulating a local and national conversation about a problem that previously had no name. Behavioral change, of course, takes more time. It is important to note that Putting Family First is led by parents from both conservative and liberal political perspectives who are united in their belief in the priority of family life, not simply as a private domain but as thoroughly connected to community citizenship.

Conclusion

I am calling for a new citizen ethic for families, beyond the idea of the family as a personal haven in a heartless world or the family as the object of professional or governmental services. The citizen family, not just the private family. The producer family, not just the consumer family. The outward-looking family, not the walled-off family. This new citizen ethic sees families as producers of deep internal bonds—lasting, flourishing marriages and strong links across the generations—and deep external bonds with their communities. This ethic moves families away from outsourcing their primary responsibilities to raise the next

generation, away from handing their kids over to social institutions such as schools and faith communities and then sitting back and complaining when those institutions do not serve their children well. As an example, one Families and Democracy initiative is mobilizing parents to take primary responsibility for the religious development of their children, in partnership with their faith community, instead of outsourcing faith development to one hour per week of religious school (when sports schedules permit), and then complaining that their kids are not learning their religion well enough.

In this citizen ethic for families, government and professionals have an important but limited role. They facilitate and provide certain resources, but they are not the drivers of the social and cultural change needed for strong families and communities. The resources of government and professionals should be “on tap,” not “on top.”

We have all heard the by-now hackneyed phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child.” It has become a liberal aphorism seen by conservatives as a way to justify bigger government programs for families. Conservatives reply, “No, it’s parents who raise children.” Both are right—it starts with parents and families but also takes a village. But there is a third crucial question not addressed by either side: Who will raise the village? It won’t be government, although government has a role, and it won’t be the market, although the market has a role. We need a third way, a new ethic of family responsibility and

civic responsibility, of personal action combined with community action, of private vows and citizen vows, of private loyalty and what Thomas Jefferson called "civic friendship."

We all know that the air our families breathe at home comes from the outside, and even in well-insulated houses, even if we duct tape the windows and doors, the air in our house is fully replaced by outside air many times a day. No air filter can protect us if the outside air is polluted enough. A few years ago there was a drive-by shooting in St. Paul, Minnesota, in which an innocent young boy was killed in the crossfire. A colleague of mine who knew the family attended the viewing. When she expressed her regrets to the boy's father, here is what he said: "I've been doing a lot of thinking over the past few days. You know, I think I was a good father to my boy. But I've decided that I was a not a good enough father to those boys who killed him." This father was saying that he did not get involved enough in how we raise all our children, in how we build the village.

Governor Quie, your life and career exemplify a citizen ethic that beautifully joins commitment to family life and commitment to public life. That is why I am so delighted to be part of your eightieth birthday celebration.

[Endnotes follow on page 39.]

Following Professor Doherty's speech, Governor Quie offered brief remarks and then both took audience questions.

Governor Quie's Remarks

I knew this was going to be a great luncheon and we would hear something we won't forget.

When I decided to run for governor in 1978, I thought back to the twenty-one years I spent in Congress, away from Minnesota. I asked myself what I regretted. I only one came up with one regret: that I did not spend as much time with my children as I would have if I had still been a farmer in Dennison, Minnesota. We would have lived and worked together and would have had our meals together. I give credit to my wife, Gretchen, for all she did during those Washington years. She was insistent—strongly insistent—about our responsibility to our family. She would say to me, "Albert, the kids wonder when you're coming home." I decided never to go to the office on Saturday—to say nothing of Sunday. The morning after I was elected governor, I told the people of the state that one thing I wouldn't do was accept invitations for Sundays. Sundays are going to be for family. I had learned from other governors that the one thing they would do differently was to stay home on Sunday. As one said, that didn't mean just in the afternoon, that meant breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

I think of four universals of the modern world: family, community, school, and television. Bill has talked about two—family and community. They have changed dramatically, as we all know. In my almost eighty years, I've watched this erosion of family and community and the growth of individualism and materialism.

In my last year as governor, I met Dr. Urie Brofenbrenner, author of the 1961 book *Two Worlds of Childhood*, which compared Russian kids and American kids. I asked him if his dire predictions about American culture had come to pass. He said the reality was a lot worse than his prediction.

One researcher suggested that the greatest way to increase academic achievement in America is for kids to have dinner with their family five days a week. That supports my belief that we've got to change the way that education and families work with each other. I believe that schools should be a place where children are taught and where their parents congregate with other parents and with teachers. They'll talk about their school. They'll create a community. We have to create a society where it's automatic that people interact with each other.

I was thinking about the Ten Commandments and found myself asking why God gave them to us? He said: I'm the only one there is, so once a week pay attention to me. He said, don't kill each other, don't steal from each other, don't commit adultery, don't tell lies about each other, and don't covet what somebody else has. Besides that, go for it. But honor your father and your mother. I wondered why God told us to honor our parents? I think it's because the closest we humans come to being godlike is when a man and woman conceived a child and a family is created. The family is a universe that we're responsible for.

I'm glad that we're developing a vocabulary for talking about how we

handle that responsibility. I thank you, Bill, for helping to build that vocabulary.

Questions and Answers

Dorothy Fleming: So often, we hear people say, "As soon as my kids are grown, I'm all done with them." They say they're going to get on with whatever it is they're doing. I wish you'd comment a little bit about the role of the grandparents.

Governor Quie: I wish Gretchen was up here talking, instead of me, because my feeling is that she is so much more superior a grandmother than I am a grandfather. But I'll say this to grandparents—don't think that your kids don't hear you. So, as you discuss and talk, like we're doing here, it's being picked up. They hear it. The reason why I know that is I remember things that I heard when I was a child and my grandparents and parents were engaged in a conversation. Those things are really meaningful to me. And I know my kids have told Gretchen and me that they remember things we've said. We didn't think they were listening, but they were and they remember. That engagement of grandparents and parents is important because it molds character and develops a sense of responsibility. Older people have a responsibility to take on that role.

Mary Mulheran: Professor Doherty, my question is for you. As a twenty-something person, I have been introduced—especially in college—to a wide range of values and morals, a

greater lack of any moral conviction, and a much more casual approach to things like marriage. If this room had been filled with all twenty-somethings, how would you have changed what you said? What kind of advice would you give people like me?

William Doherty: The twenty-somethings want marriage, yearn in some ways for permanent bonds, and seem to be frightened about whether it can happen. So I would appeal to the vision and to the core ideals and help them to reflect on the counter-messages that are occurring. Yours is the generation whose parents divorced in such great numbers. Then I would talk about the ideals that are important to hold on to and what it's going to take to get there. I would try to help them analyze the cultural message they're getting. So, when somebody says, we could get married, but if it doesn't work out, we could get divorced, what kind of a message is that and how does that infiltrate? And I would try to appeal to their generational pride. I think this generation is more cynical, but because of that they know that they have to work at. In my time, we just got married and assumed it would all work out. So there is this sense that they now know that marriage is not automatically for life and they're really going to have to work at it.

Mitch Pearlstein: Why is there such reluctance on the part of a number of academics to deal with the question of marriage?

William Doherty: Since the 1960s, we have demystified marriage in some

ways that are good. It used to be that nobody talked about domestic violence and wife battering. It was not studied. The first studies were in the 1970s, for crying out loud. We know that this is a serious problem. When the divorce revolution came along, there was a sense that some of the divorce laws encouraged people to lie and make up stories about mental cruelty and adultery that weren't around and that some divorces, in fact, are necessary for the protection of adults and children. So there was this movement. And, of course, the feminist movement talked about marriage as an unequal relationship that really is bad for women. There was this deconstruction, this critique of marriage that came along, and the idea that children can be raised in single parent families successfully, which is true, but not as likely to be successfully raised as in a married family. And then we had the gay movement, the gay liberation movement, and so the movement towards gay/lesbian couples and a movement about marriage, the rising cohabitation.

What happened was that in a sort of liberal, open-minded, academic culture, marriage became one lifestyle among others, one form of doing adult relationships. And we, at the same time we became morally relativistic, so diversity and pluralism means accepting the quality of all forms. Marriage becomes controversial then if you want to assert that it is superior as a social institution to cohabitation. That, in general, it's the optimal environment to raise children. And I would hold both of those with no apology, but fifteen years ago, I would

not have, okay? Because as part of that particular culture, you do not want to assert ideals. I had a conversation with local marriage and family therapists about this, behind closed doors, no media there, I said, can we talk about this? And it was one of the scarier conversations that this professional group had ever had. And as one woman said, are you telling me that we should have an ideal? Because ideals had become impressive in the kind of relativistic world of the progressive liberal left. An ideal itself is oppressive. That's at the heart of it. So it isn't for me a strange phenomenon that there's so much ambivalence about marriage. It comes from some deep convictions and it comes from a sense that we can't make anybody feel bad about their lifestyle, that they're all created equal. But it's changing. It's changing in the face of just sort of some cold realities.

Jo Beld: I'm a faculty member at St. Olaf and I teach a course in family ethics and public policy. They're reading some of the literature published by the Institute for American Values. I have a concern and a question. My concern is that the course is overwhelmingly oversubscribed, but only 10 percent of the students in the course and those who want to be in the course but couldn't get in are male. And I'm concerned about the maldistribution of concern about these issues between young men and young women like the twenty-something-year-old who just spoke. That's my concern. My question is that much of the oversubscription of time and the lack of family time that you described is among families where

we have a choice about how much time we're going to spend at the workplace and how much time we're going to spend with our kids, knowing that if we cut down our time in the workplace, we're still going to be able to pay the rent and buy food and take care of our kids. What responsibility do families have to families who don't have the resources and have to choose between spending time with their kids and being able to meet their kids' economic needs?

William Doherty: Well, that's an important question, because this relates to the economic issues and the families, the working poor families who have to work the two jobs. There is an initiative that's going to occur on October 24—I'm on the national steering committee for it—called Take Back Your Time Day. And it's dealing with the issues of overwork and overscheduling. And so I think those are all in there and that family is thoroughly caught up in work, we work far more hours than we did in the 1950s, and some families have to work far more than they would like. The only other thing I could add is, in terms of men, I'm really glad that you raised that because in the twenty-something generation, part of what we're finding is that there is a disconnect between young men and young women. And the young men are often not even thinking about getting married until into their thirties; the biological clock is ticking for women. And if we're going to be reviving marriage, we really have to be thinking about what's going on with young men in our society.

Governor Quie: I'm very intrigued with Stephen Carter's book, *Integrity*, which makes three basic points. The one that everybody understands is do the hard work of figuring out what is right and what is responsibility. The second one is have the will and the courage to do what is right rather than what is wrong, because it's wrong choices that get us into trouble. But the third one is to talk about, speak openly about why you made that choice. And I think that's what is going to make the difference. So when Professor Beld and others raise these questions, then you get the discussion and talk about it and you go through that and other people will learn from you. So I think it's the absence of family conversations or community conversations about these issues that affect family that permits us to go down on the devil's toboggan sled instead of correcting this as fast as we should.

Notes

1 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

2 Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All*. (New York: Viking, 1998).

3 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969). Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Robert D. Putnam (ed.), *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

4 The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions 2002: The Social Health of Marriage in America*. (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University, 2002).

5 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 100–101.

6 Council of Economic Advisers to the President. "Teens and Their Parents in the Twenty-first Century: An Examination of Trends in Teen Behavior and the Role of Parental Involvement." Report released May, 2000. This was an analysis of the Adolescent Health Study, a national probability sample of adolescents and parents.

7 Sandra L. Hofferth, "How American Children Spend Their Time," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 2002, 63:295–308.

8 William J. Doherty and Barbara Z. Carlson, *Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World*. (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

9 Hofferth, "How American Children Spend Their Time," Global Strategy Group, Inc., "Talking With Teens: The YMCA Parent and Teen Survey." Final Report, April 2000. National probability sample of teens who were asked to list their chief concerns. Teens of all ages listed not enough time with their parents as the top concern.

10 Center for the New American Dream, "What Do Kids Want That Money Cannot Buy." A national poll of 746 children, ages nine to fourteen. Washington, D.C.: Center for the New American Dream, 2003. <http://www.newdream.org/publications/bookrelease.html>

11 William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).

12 See Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage*, pp. 14–17, 26–47.

13 See Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage*, pp. 2–3.

14 Cited in Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage*, p. 29.

15 Cited in Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage*, p. 34.

16 Paul R. Amato and Stacy J. Rogers, “Do Attitudes Towards Divorce Affect Marital Quality?” *Journal of Family Issues*, 1999, 20(1):69–86.

17 Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. (New York: Madison Books, Revised Edition, 2000).

18 William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times*. (South Bend, IN: Sorin Books, 2000).

19 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 74.

20 William J. Doherty, *Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

21 For a new historical analysis of the interplay between consumerism and citizenship, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

22 For a discussion of contemporary citizenship initiatives, see Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

23 Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). ■