

The moral meaning of the family

STANLEY HAUERWAS

BY THE TIME you read this, the saga of the White House Conference on the Family will have come to an end. What had once seemed like a politically welcome and inoffensive project—who could be opposed to strengthening the American family?—was marked from the start by bitter squabbles over staffing, procedure, and agenda. Catholic lobbying eliminated the original candidate to head the Conference staff. A conservative “pro-family coalition” suspected the whole operation of cloaking a further assault on the traditional family by liberal social engineers. Pro-choice and pro-life activists clashed at state conventions, and some states dropped out of the delegate-selection process altogether. The pro-family coalition walked out of the first of the Conference’s three meetings, in Baltimore; and a contretemps at the second meeting, in Minneapolis, caused both Catholic Charities and the U.S. Catholic Conference to withdraw from the moderate-to-liberal Coalition for the White House Conference.

Like the earlier state conventions, both these meetings could agree on some recommendations: flexibility in working hours and employment policies so as to support parental responsibility; repeal of the higher federal tax “penalty” for working married couples; increases in the housing supply; tax credits for families who care for aged relatives at home; recognition for social security and tax purposes of the economic value of homemaking and caring for children; and, in fact, a whole shopping list of other items. Yet even here, votes were often close; the issues of abortion, homosexual rights, and ERA were never far away; and the final recommendations seemed a little like a thin layer of scar tissue over the very deep wounds.

The premise for the White House Conference was that the family is “in crisis”—a premise commonly advanced, first, by the observation that the family is a very good thing, and, then, by the familiar recitation of divorce statistics, examples of wife- and child-beating, rates of delinquency, claims of women’s liberation, evidences of rising immorality and self-centered hedonism. By saving the family, it is implied, we can save our society. Of course, others have suggested that the very idea that the family is in crisis is a mistake, one besetting those who cannot distinguish crisis from change. In spite of

everything, it is pointed out, people seem to end living together and some even have children. The rising divorce rate does not necessarily indicate that the family has broken down. The fact that an extremely high percentage of the divorced remarry may indeed suggest just the opposite. They even seem to remarry individuals remarkably like their former spouses. The family, in spite of indications to the contrary, remains a tough institution not easily defeated. Could it be that those who decry the loss of familial relationships are only arbitrarily asserting a preference for one style of family constellation over others?

What the whole saga of the White House Conference demonstrated, if demonstration was necessary, is that the central issue is not really whether the family will continue to exist, but what kind of family should exist and what moral presuppositions are necessary to form and sustain it. The fact is, the most divisive question of all at these meetings was the very *definition* of the family. It might once have been thought a poor minimum—but one inevitable in a morally pluralistic society—to content ourselves with the Census Bureau definition of the family as “a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption.” Even that, it turns out, proved controversial, with some Conference participants wanting to close a “loophole” by adding “heterosexual” before “marriage,” and others worried that the definition excluded “single-person families,” homosexual couples, and alternative “structures and lifestyles.”

In these terms, it does make sense to suggest that we are in a crisis: our problem is that we no longer can describe what the family should be and/or why we should think of it as our most basic moral institution.

Because we have all had an experience of family and most of us are involved in families, it seems bizarre to suggest that we do not know what our involvement means. I am suggesting that we lack the moral and linguistic resources to express adequately what happened to us and what we do in families. More importantly, I am convinced that the moral language of our culture actually tends to distort the very experience we are trying to describe.

Ethicists, moreover, will provide little help in recovering the experience of the family. For modern ethical reflection, the family is simply an anomaly, a curiosity left over from previous ages. From the “moral point of view,” identification with relatives appears at best a sentimental attachment, but more

STANLEY HAUERWAS is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

likely an irrational commitment. Nowhere in contemporary ethical literature is there a discussion of the simple but fundamental assumption that we have a responsibility to our own children which overrides responsibility to children who are not ours. Although a powerful assumption, there is no adequate account in contemporary ethical reflection of why we hold it or if it is justified. Instead, the best my colleagues can offer is the doubtful thesis that children ought to have rights.

It is no surprise, therefore, that one of the few questions disconcerting to the Notre Dame students who take my course on Marriage and the Family is, "What reason would you give why one should be willing to have children?" They say "children are fun," or "children are an expression of a couple's love," or "it is just the thing to do"; but they clearly doubt that any of these is an adequate basis for having, much less knowing how to raise, children. Their often unexpressed doubt seems to me to illustrate the depth of the crisis concerning the family: we lack a moral account of why we commit ourselves to having children, some normative sense of what it means to be a parent.

Therefore the problem with the kind of naive approach marking not only the White House Conference but much other discussion of the family is that it continues to assume that we all know what we mean when we say the family is a good thing. The moral issue then appears to be that we are not living up to the standards of what we all know to be good. But that simply fails to confront our inability to describe or evaluate "family." Indeed I suspect one of the reasons we so extol the value of the family is because we are so unsure of its worth. We attempt to substitute rhetoric for substance and are thus unable to deal with the obvious shortcomings of the institution.

IN THIS RESPECT I think we are a little like Augustus in one of the episodes of Masterpiece Theater's *I, Claudius*. Like many political reformers and radicals since, Augustus was particularly conservative about personal and familial morality. He believed strongly that the traditional Roman family, which literally placed all power in the hands of the patriarch, was the backbone of the state. Thus he was outraged when he discovered that his daughter had entertained half of Rome in her bed, and that her lovers had come from senatorial families.

In a marvelous scene we see Augustus calling his daughter's lovers before him and lecturing them on the depth of their immorality. His concern was not only that they had been willing to sleep with his daughter, but that they had betrayed their political duty by failing to begin families of their own. Instead of dallying with his daughter, they should be fulfilling their duty as Romans by providing Rome with sons.

Augustus's speech is ironic, because while he no doubt believed everything he was saying, as emperor he was also engaged in policies whose clear result was to weaken the Roman family. Just as he continued to say the senate ruled while systematically stripping it of its power, so he continued to believe in the family but also would not allow it to be, as it had in the past, an independent commonwealth within the state. As Robert Nisbet has pointed out, in earlier times

families bore responsibility for most independent offenses; but under Augustus individuals were punished (directly by the state) as if they had no family. Even more important, Augustus changed inheritance laws so that individuals might own property apart from family membership.

Now I say we resemble Augustus somewhat because we want to retain the fiction that we hold dear the family while adhering to disharmonious convictions and policies that militate against the family. In the classic words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." We are inheritors of a history which has rendered the family a highly questionable institution.

This is not the place for me to recount this history. Indeed, I am aware that there is nothing more problematic than historical claims about how the family has changed. Most of us, though, have been influenced by a sociological rendition of what has happened to the family that is useful to recall. In the past the family was large, extended, and patriarchal, but this has been replaced by the nuclear family. This smaller and more democratic family, as a result of growing specialization of social and economic functions, has lost the economic, protective, and educational functions of the traditional family. In the process the family has taken on a more profound and rewarding purpose—namely, it now specializes in emotions.

This new form of family is a correlative of the requirements of industrial society. Christopher Lasch explains this view: "Whereas kinship served as the unifying principle of earlier forms of society, the modern social order rests on impersonal, rational, and 'universalistic' forms of solidarity. In a competitive and highly mobile society the extended family has no place. The nuclear family, on the other hand, serves industrial society as a necessary refuge. It provides adults with an escape from the competitive pressures of the market, while at the same time it equips the young with the inner resources to master those pressures." The nuclear family, according to Edward Shorter, is not characterized by how many people are living under the same roof but by the privileged emotional climate that must be protected from outside intrusion.

This historical account has been challenged by those who insist that the nuclear family was present before the industrial revolution. But aside from whether this particular account is historically or sociologically correct in every detail, it has begun to serve as a normative justification for our understanding of the family. We use this allegedly descriptive account to justify our assumption that the family should be understood as the prime locus of love and intimacy in our society. At the same time, we tend to see the development of the nuclear family as part of the continuing story of freedom—a break from the "feudal" or "tribal" institutions of the past.

The power of this narrative is amply illustrated by how it has



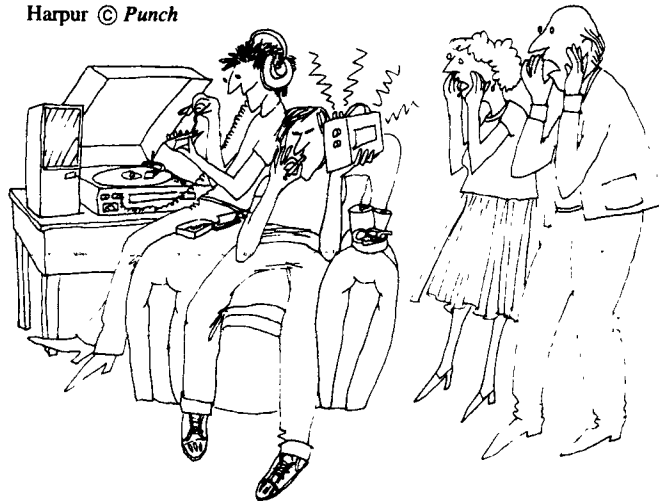
led us to forget that the family has traditionally not been rooted in contract but biology—namely, its core function has been providing human continuity through reproduction and child rearing. As Robert Nisbet reminds us, few people have ever let something as important as the need for future generations rest on anything as fragile as the emotion of love. “Even if we assume that in most places at most times a majority of spouses knew something akin to passionate love, however fleetingly, the great strength of the family has everywhere been consanguineal rather than conjugal. And here, not affection, but duty, obligation, honor, mutual aid, and protection have been the key elements.”

Nisbet argues, therefore, that it is not sexual immorality, the revolt of the youth, or women’s liberation that has weakened the family, but rather the loss of economic, political, and moral functions of the family that have generated the former. Contrary to the expectation that this might have been accidental, the very moral convictions linked to the history recounted above necessarily had this result. For family kinship has always been an anomaly for the liberal tradition. Only if human beings can be separated in a substantial degree from kinship can they be free individuals subject to egalitarian policies of our society. Thus we simply assume—and this is an assumption shared alike by political conservative and liberal—that it is more important to be an “autonomous person” than to be a “Hauerwas” or a “Pulaski” or a “Smith.” Thus for example, the Supreme Court held in *Planned Parenthood v. Danforth* that husbands have no rights if their wives wish an abortion since “abortion is a purely personal right of the woman, and the status of marriage can place no limitation on personal rights.” As Paul Ramsey has observed, in spite of our society’s alleged interest in the bond of marriage that bond is now understood simply as a contract between individuals who remain as atomistic as before marriage.

In the name of freedom we have created “the individual,” who now longs for community in the form of “interpersonal interaction.” The family is praised, therefore, in Christopher Lasch’s marvelous phrase, as a “haven in a heartless world”—the paradigm of “interpersonal relations.” Such a conception of the family assumes, moreover, “a radical separation between work and leisure and between public and private life. The emergence of the nuclear family as the principal form of family life reflected the high value modern society attached to privacy, and the glorification of privacy in turn reflected the devaluation of work.” Thus, according to Lasch, relations in the family have come to resemble relations in the rest of the society—namely, a relationship between friendly strangers. “Parents refrain from arbitrarily imposing their wishes on the child, thereby making it clear that authority deserves to be regarded as valid only insofar as it conforms to reason. Yet in the family as elsewhere ‘universalistic’ standards prove on examination to be illusory.” And as a result relations in the family too often become nothing less than power struggles between independent principalities.

In an attempt to defuse the destructiveness of this situation, parents try to raise their children by undervaluing the intensity

Harpur © Punch



“We’ve decided to stay together for your sake.”

of family life. By becoming our child’s friend we think we can avoid the politics of the family, which are too often the dirtiest politics of all. We know that too often parents make inordinate sacrifices for their children, sacrifices which the parents then use as blackmail. So we assume the way to avoid such strategies is to develop a form of life where no one is asked to sacrifice at all or to suffer for anyone else. We treat our children as equals which, translated, means we place no demands on them. We thus raise our children permissively; because we fear “imposing” our values on them and psychologically damaging them. But by doing so we fail to see that permissiveness is a form of social control that results in the authority of the peer group being substituted for that of the family.

Ironically this kind of family which was justified in the name of intimacy now finds intimacy impossible to sustain. For, as Ferdinand Mount points out, “in a truly intimate relationship one person makes unique claims upon another, claims for services, affection, respect and attention which can be supplied only by that one person.” By trying to make the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, impersonal we try to avoid the demands of intimacy. “Intimacy,” writes Mount, “always entails personal authority. The claims of a child for care and love, even if unspoken by child or mother, are just as much a moral authority over his father as the father’s claims for filial affection and/or obedience and respect. For authority in this sense does not depend upon inequality nor does it wither away under the beneficent rays of equality. It depends solely upon one person acknowledging another person’s right to make claims on him in particular.”

The relationship between liberalism and the family is obviously a complex matter requiring a more nuanced argument than I can develop here. However, in brief I am suggesting that the “crisis of the family” does not indicate the *absence* of a moral attitude toward the family, but reflects how the family has increasingly been formed by what in fact are the deepest moral convictions we have about ourselves. Our liberal forefathers assumed that their commitment to the freedom of

the individual was consistent with and even supportive of the family. Milton Friedman continues this assumption as he claims that liberals, "take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements. In a society freedom has nothing to say about what an individual does with his freedom; it is not an all-embracing ethic. Indeed, a major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem for the individual to wrestle with."

But as Robert Paul Wolff has stated, from such a perspective,

the ties of blood are merely one source among many of the desires whose satisfaction we seek rationally to maximize. One man enjoys eating, and puts his money into fine food; a second races fast cars, and allocates his resources for carburetors and tune-ups; a third man raises children—his own—and he finds himself possessed of the strong desire that they should be happy and healthy. So he puts his resources into their schooling and food and clothing, and spends his spare time with them. If his desire for his children's welfare is stronger than his taste in fine cars or fine food, then rationality will dictate that he spend more on them than on eating and transportation. But if his desire is not essentially different from those of his fellow citizens, the state has no reason to treat his interest in his children as taking precedence over his neighbor's interest in racing cars or fine food.

By accepting this as an account of ourselves, we, the heirs of the liberal tradition, find ourselves bereft of the moral anchor supplied by those particularistic commitments we used to indicate with the word "family."

IF MY ANALYSIS of the moral crisis of the family is even close to being correct, then what we require is a language to help us articulate the experience of the family and the loyalties it represents. Such a language will thus determine how we understand ourselves and our society because the family is integral to the entire culture. Such a language must clearly denote our character as historical beings and how our moral lives are based in particular loyalties and relations. If we are to learn to care for others, we must first learn to care for those we find ourselves joined to by accident of birth. Only then will love be understood, aside from attraction to those who are like us, also as regard and respect for those whom we have not chosen but to whom we find ourselves tied.

For the most inescapable fact about families, regardless of their different forms and customs, is that we do not choose to be part of them. We do not choose our relatives; they are simply given. * Of course we can like some better than others, but even those we do not like are inextricably ours. To be part of a family is to understand what it means to be "stuck with" a

* In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick makes the interesting observation that liberals and radicals have always had an ambiguous relationship to the family since it is not appropriate to enforce across wider society the love and care within a family where such relationships are voluntarily undertaken. Nozick must surely have an odd sense of "voluntary," since the family is anything but "voluntary."

history and a people. Thus we even enjoy telling stories about our often less than admirable kin because such stories help us know what being "stuck with" such a history entails. Unfortunately, we have tended today to understand such storytelling primarily as entertainment (which it surely is) rather than representing the moral affirmation of what it means to be part of a family.

In other words, the family is morally crucial for our existence as the only means we have to bind time. Without the family, and the inter-generational ties involved, we have no way to know what it means to be historic beings. As a result we become determined by rather than determining our histories. Set out in the world with no family, without story of and for the self, we will simply be captured by the reigning ideologies of the day.

Put differently, we must recover the moral importance of our willingness to have children. Like it or not, the most morally significant thing any of us ever has the opportunity to do is to have children. A child represents our willingness to go on in the face of difficulties, suffering, and in our case, the ambiguity of modern life and is thus our claim that we have something worthwhile to pass on. The refusal to have children can be the ultimate act of despair that often masks the deepest kind of self-hate and disgust. The fear and rejection of parenthood, the tendency to view the family as nothing more than companionable marriage, and the understanding of marriage as one of a series of nonbinding commitments, are but indications that our society has a growing distrust of our ability to deal with the future.

In this respect, the most telling devaluation of the family in *All Our Children*, the much discussed Carnegie Council report on the family written by Kenneth Keniston, is the complete absence of any indication that the family involves more than those ties necessary to raise children. The complex ties of adult children to adult parents simply do not exist from the perspective of the report. It is as though Social Security has removed all responsibility adult children have for parents; and that adult parents can now retire to sunny lands, their responsibilities over when their children are "making it on their own." Any sense that the elderly have a responsibility to share their wisdom with their children or that they have a responsibility to lead decent lives in support of their children has been eradicated by convincing the aged that the one benefit of growing old in a society that has no place for them is freedom from all responsibilities.

Ironically, the loss of any moral role for such older parents is a correlative of the loss of any moral task for younger parents. It is not sufficient to welcome children, for we must also be willing to initiate them into what we think is true and good about human existence. For example, I think we should not admire religious or non-religious parents who fail to educate their children in the parents' convictions. It is a false and bad-faith position to think that we can or should raise our children to "make up their own minds" when they grow up. Children are not without values today; instead, we as parents lack the courage to examine our own lives in a manner that we

can know what we pass on is truthful and duty-paid.

Only by recovering this kind of moral confidence will parents deserve to reclaim their claim from the "experts." In matters moral there are no "experts"; and therefore all parents are charged with forming their children's lives according to what they know best. Rather than "experts," there are moral paradigms, guides for us. The task for parents is to direct their children's attention to those paradigms which provide the most compelling sense of what we can and should be.

What, briefly, do I think religious faith has to do with all this? It is not, I think, the usual assumption that the Judeo-Christian tradition keeps people on the straight and narrow sexual path necessary to sustain marriage. On the contrary, my classes on marriage are begun with the observation that both Christianity and marriage teach us that life is not about "happiness." Rather, the Hebrew-Christian tradition helps sustain the virtue of hope in a world which rarely provides evidence that such hope is justified. There may be a secular analogue to such hope, but for those of us who identify with Judaism or Christianity, our continued formation of families is witness to our belief that the falseness of this world is finally bounded by a more-profound truth.

Art

ICONS OF VULGARITY

PLEBEIAN ENERGY & PATRICIAN REPRISAL

THE ZONING LAWS that permit residential lofts, such as those in New York's Soho, to be sandwiched between commercial ones in the same building are based on the premise that the production of art is a form of "light manufacturing." In this instance, the bureaucratic imagination is well ahead of the popular one in granting art its secular status and in recognizing the nature of the art market.

A significant component of success on the current market is the willingness to replicate oneself. Salability hinges considerably on finding a convincing style that is also a formula allowing one to create relatively identical works on a production basis in much the same way as a bootmaker. The recognizability of the product provides reassurance to a public that is overanxious to decipher what the artist is "saying" but under-equipped to see what he is actually doing. The duplication of the product assures repeated sales to art marketeers who *do* know what the artist is doing.

Lester Johnson, one of the best known contemporary figure painters, knows his trade. He is a careerist with a market sense that would be the envy of any commodities broker. His work demonstrates that an artistic sensibility, far from pollen-delicate, is a solid apparatus.

In the early fifties Johnson was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, an action painter with an inchoate

interest in content. Back then, figurative interest was chancy. Abstraction was the reigning doctrine, the figure was *déclassé* in theoretical circles, and young painters with ambition were jockeying for place in Hans Hofmann's do-your-own-thing retinue of expressionists.

But the death of the figure never quite happened. The figure, like any good narrative, didn't lose its popular appeal. Besides, by the seventies, the cash value of abstraction was in decline. *The Wall Street Journal*, discussing slumping investor confidence, was blunt: "Since the end of the speculative sixties, few people have been willing to put their money on contemporary painters who churn out those while-you-wait abstracts."

Johnson's long shot paid off.

Over the years, as the canons of abstraction have become less formidable, Johnson's commitment to the figure has become more resolute. Forms have become sharper, outlines more definitive and less painterly, the imagery and its underlying attitude as hard and clear as the surfaces themselves. What few drips and blots still occur seem not so much "accidents" of haste as a mannerism calling attention to Johnson's past affinities with Pollock and DeKooning. They are bits of art history performing as theatrical asides.

His current canvases, life-sized Proustian friezes of young girls and guys, continue the pictorial theme he has been restating without let-up for the past ten years. The subject matter of his recent New York show at the Gimpel Weitzenhoffer Gallery was established by 1970: panoramas of the man-in-the-street, interchangeable people in passage, isolated individuals in a group.

By now, Johnson's lonely crowd is both a stylistic and a sociological cliché. What makes his latest paintings interesting is not so much the subject matter as Johnson's own posture toward it. Contrary to popular piety, which fancies the artist as a disenfranchised adversary of bourgeois values, Lester Johnson *is* the bourgeoisie. He paints with just that blend of sensuality, scholarship, irony, and class consciousness — one could even say snobbery — that plants him squarely on his lawn in Milford, Connecticut.

As Johnson has become older, his figures have become younger, more obviously working-class. It is this change of pitch, a shift of emphasis on age and class, that commands attention. In his latest street scenes it is the minor premise that gives life to an otherwise overworked theme. These paintings are less a comment on the condition of Man, as critics have been claiming over the last two decades, than a statement of the personal predicament of one now-successful man leaving middle age.

Johnson's present women are as brassy as ever but no longer matronly, and each with the same head of voguish frizzed hair. They are predictably dressed in the gaudy patterns that are Johnson's trademark. But in the earlier paintings, when the male figures wore suits and bowlers and carried newspapers, the patterning of the women's dresses served a strictly formal purpose. They functioned as abstract decorative elements, as well as spatial divisions, in the same way that patterns function