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A Fire Lit

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Hal Boyd

A Fire Lit

In Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Road*, readers encounter a post-apocalyptic America shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The haunting days are dimmer than the terror-filled nights. “Ash,” “blacktop,” and “gunmetal light” mark the road on which a young boy and his father travel in search of safety. On the journey, however, they encounter far more depravity than humanity.

But there are occasional moments of light.

Throughout the novel, candles and torches, fires and flames—both literal and symbolic—juxtapose the overwhelming opaqueness. The contrast of shining light against such a bleak backdrop makes the moments of goodness all the more poignant. The light, in other words, seems to shine all the brighter.

The articles, essays, and insights contained in this, the inaugural volume of the School of Family Life’s student journal, represent points of light and truth. They provide practical and theoretical information to support our most cherished relationships—or, to steal

a phrase from Edmund Burke—to support life’s “little platoons” from families, faith communities, and other core institutions.

These institutions, though under distress, are thankfully part of the reason society does not face the extreme desolation of McCarthy’s imagination. But that’s not to say that the United States today isn’t confronted with formidable challenges.

“Thirty-five percent of Americans over forty-five are chronically lonely,” according to David Brooks’ recent book *The Second Mountain*. “In 1950, less than 10 percent of households were single-person households, now nearly 30 percent are.” He continues: “The majority of children born to women under thirty are born into single-parent households. The fastest growing political group is unaffiliated. The fastest growing religious group is unaffiliated.”

Meanwhile, some 70 percent of Americans today also say they feel angry about the current political system. The percent of citizens who are satisfied “with the way

things are going” hovers in the 30 percent range—two decades ago, the figure hit highs above 70 percent.

Things aren’t dark yet, as the poet says, but they may be getting there.

Despite these realities, I can’t help but note other sanguine signs, including those contained within the pages of this very volume. Perhaps some will say that it’s one part reason and three parts overly eager optimism to suppose that the prescriptions for what plagues our age might be written down in the journal of a university nestled in the Mountain West.

But if not here, then where? And if not from the minds of burgeoning scholars, then who else? Yes, many may feel that the times are bleak, but these pieces are testimonials of brighter days ahead; they are points of light that, when combined together, begin to illuminate our communities, our homes, and our halls of power with greater truth and light.

It’s not just family studies or the broader marketplace of ideas that are yearning for increased elucidation. Sharp social science, sound reasoning, and the synthesis of scholarly insights and powerful prose lift us all.

In an age of message bombardment, those with the ability to translate and alchemize it into accessible and practical information have the capacity to light society’s path toward a more hopeful state. This is particularly true in matters pertaining to family life.

According to a consensus governmental report from the Committee on Supporting the Parents of Young Children, “Parental knowledge of child development is positively associated with quality parent-child interactions and the likelihood of parents’ engagement

in practices that promote their children’s healthy development.” Additionally, research supports the notion that “parents with knowledge of evidence-based parenting practices, especially those related to promoting children’s physical health and safety, are more likely than those without such knowledge to engage in those practices.”

When parents and families are equipped with sound, evidence-based practices, outcomes appear to improve. The noted educator and philosopher John Dewey observed that “with the growth of civilization,” knowledge of the “bare necessities” is insufficient to replicate or advance “the life of the group.” In other words, improving lives requires not only discerning evidence-based practices but disseminating them to others—from professor to student, from student to peer, from the academy to the world. Lighting this flame—as this journal is doing—and then passing the torch is all the more vital when discourse is dim and the dialogue grows dark.

In perhaps the most poignant scene of McCarthy’s novel, the wounded father instructs his son “to carry the fire.”

The boy, understandably, responds hesitantly: “Is the fire real?” His father reassures him that it is. “Where is it? I don’t know where it is,” he replies.

“Yes you do. It’s inside you. It always was there. I can see it.”

In each article the flame is lit, and the torch is passed. The light comes from within and from the best of social science and contemporary thought. Pieced together, these points of light—these emerging scholars—provide me with ample hope for a brighter world.