We can learn much about sexuality and the natural family from the collective tribal wisdom and understanding of the peoples of Africa. Human cultures throughout history have attempted to harness and direct the potent power of transmitting life. Most cultures stipulated not only the person or persons with whom one could have relations, but the manner in which the sexual act might be done. These subconscious understandings have built my philosophy and that of other Africans.

The general instinct of humanity was to shield the powerful procreative act from misuse and society from the misuse of sex. Christian and Muslim influence, which came to Africa around the mid-1800s, ensured for a time that the relationship between a man and a woman would continue to be considered sacred. However, by the mid-1960s, this ideal of sex between only men and women in the bond of marriage began to fall apart. This was true in many cultures in the West and in the East, but perhaps the impact has been most extreme in Africa with its delicate tribal balances. Once it began, the ideal of the sacred nature of sex rapidly collapsed. This resulted in children being born out of wedlock, marital breakdown, abandonment of children, and even the abandonment of the elderly, who used to be held in great esteem in African cultures. Subsequently, an explosive increase in sexually transmitted diseases of every imaginable kind has occurred.

What led to this massive collapse of an ideal of sexuality within marriage that was once almost universal? First, thanks to contraceptives and their aggressive worldwide marketing, many seem to get away with infidelity and premarital sex. But deception, of course, quietly destroys relationships, and the destruction is now so massive that it’s affecting whole nations, as indicated by the terrible impact of AIDS.

Second, there is the demystification of sex, which looks on its surface like a good thing. But when sex is no longer sacred, nor the power to beget children anything special, everything else goes. This demystification has been done through what I would call a value-free sex education, based entirely on...
how pregnancy and disease can be avoided. In this kind of sex education no morals or responsibility to anyone is mentioned except mutual momentary consent very momentary.

Third, we live on what has been called “planet Hollywood,” a name I have borrowed. There’s a worldwide dissemination of a culture of pleasure as the ultimate desirable good. Movie figures commit adultery, engage in overt sexual play, teenagers neck in the back of cars, and pornography can now be beamed electronically to all corners of the world.

Fourth is the individualistic philosophy of “me” and “I.” Traditional concepts of loyalty and the greater good of the family or society no longer exist. Divorce is cast in an attractive light, as some sort of right, while perseverance, dialogue, or even compromise in marriage is made to appear oppressive and reactionary. Children are fought over or sacrificed to the selfish whims of their parents, since, after all, they only exist if they are wanted. If they are not wanted they have no right to exist.

Fifth, there is in many countries a worldwide assumption of a small family norm. We have recently tried to remove it from our country’s legislative papers and encourage the idea that responsible parenthood, not adherence to a small family norm, is desirable.

For most Africans, the only social security they will ever know is their family. And children have a stabilizing effect on their parents’ relationships. Each child is one more reason to try harder to make a marriage work. However, many families in the world have only one or two children. This has been called “responsible parenthood,” a true misnomer if ever there was one.

Sixth, there are extraordinary expectations that have been roused in all peoples, mainly due to television. How is a man supposed to behave like a combination of Romeo, Casanova, and Arnold Schwarzenegger? Many men simply retreat in self-protection. Women likewise feel compelled to remain ever young and to compete with every half-naked girl we are bombarded with in advertisements and magazine covers. As I watch more and more young people being taken home in coffins—in Africa you can see the plague passing every weekend, when the young people who are dead from HIV/AIDS are taken home to be buried—when I see this, growing old seems to me to be a great and desirable good. The life expectancy in many African countries has gone down by ten to fifteen years.

Finally, there has been the loss of a sense of a deity to whom all are ultimately answerable for their actions. When people think God is “dead,” they often excuse irresponsible actions and the pursuit of fantastic fantasies.

To conclude, the beauty of sexual love lies in the fact that it is love, which is a decisive act of the mature will to love and to cherish, even and perhaps especially when things are tough. Yes, even when the spouse proves to be sometimes less than what we expected. He or she who loves in a mature way will then rise to the full, mature status of his potential as a human being, for when we love—and to love, to choose to love, is a great good indeed—this good comes back to us with its full force and power, making us better people. All the lies in our culture of pleasure-seeking sink into oblivion when confronted with the splendor of unconditional love.

Margaret Ogola, M.D. is Medical Director of the Family Life Association of Kenya and for the Cottolenga Hospice for HIV-positive orphans. She and her husband, George, have four children.

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“Each child is one more reason to try harder to make a marriage work.”

Mary Ann Glendon, quoted by Elder Bruce C. Hafen

“Paradise without people is not worth the having.”

Egyptian proverb, quoted by Madame Jehan Sadat