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Authoritative Voices

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Betsy VanDenBerghe

Authoritative Voices



I was born as the pendulum shift of the 1960s swung decidedly into the Sexual Revolution. Reared in a faith tradition that, like most at the time, emphasized traditional mores, I remained fairly unaffected by the ethos of free love and permissiveness permeating the culture at large. By the time I reached college in the early 1980s, the pendulum had swung back to a preppy look and big hair more akin to the 50s. Still, the relaxed sexual standards of the 60s persisted, and by this point, the Sexual Revolution, along with second-wave feminism of the 70s, very much affected eighteen-year-old me.

Newly landed at a women's college lauding sexual freedom and frequented by guest speakers like Gloria Steinem in her nascent phase of "a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle" (she later moderated and married), I felt not only affected but also confused. While religious devotion helped me, as it has countless others, to escape the excesses of my age, I needed other voices, too, authoritative ones. Experts from the world at large who could affirm that what I was hearing over the pulpit wasn't nuts: sexual restraint has its own rewards, marriage and family life are worth pursuing, and life is worth more than the pursuit of pleasure.

We all need these voices, or at least, most religious adherents do: academics, authors, philosophers, and screenwriters reassuring us that we aren't just drinking the Kool-aid in observing the tenets of our faith. Swimming upstream with our counter-culture lifestyle invites not only loneliness, but also cognitive dissonance: am I an anachronism, inflexible, hopelessly antiquated? Outside voices—and even inside ones well-versed on the flow of social currents—give us the mettle to persist when our faith falters and it seems we're the only ones living this strange way.

During my single years in the 80s, a debate raged over the personal and professional costs of having kids, with many at the time advising that women needed children, well, like a fish needs a bicycle. I clung to the warning of a regretful journalist who'd opted out of childbearing and reared her remorseful voice to young women like me, caught in the crosshairs of our culture wars, in a memoir. Her opening chapter described driving home from yet another failed infertility treatment while she screamed out the car window at extremists who convinced her a career would be enough. This cautionary tale joined the clamor over career versus children that burgeoned into the mommy wars persisting

today. The thoughtful, helpful voices in this, or any, public cacophony acknowledge both trade-offs and benefits. They avoid extremism and easy answers to help those still forming their worldview navigate the future vicariously older and wiser.

Particularly helpful in discussions on sex, marriage, and family are social scientists and psychologists who serve as academic sentinels. Back in 1993, respected scholar Barbara Dafoe Whitehead weighed in on an explosive pop culture debate involving then Vice President Dan Quayle and a likable television character named Murphy Brown. When Murphy, a fictional single career woman, celebrated the birth of her baby, along with a multitude of fans, in a highly anticipated TV episode, Vice President Quayle countered that she mocked “the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice.” A fast and furious backlash against Quayle continued to escalate—until it met its match in Dafoe’s *Atlantic Monthly* cover story, “Dan Quayle Was Right.” Dafoe’s thorough magazine piece, full of academic gravitas, went on to win awards and deepen a heretofore uniformed public discourse over family formation with formidable research data.

Dafoe’s willingness to get off academia’s sometimes insular hamster wheel and insert expertise into the public square altered discussions over family formation that continue today. When columnist David Brooks recently took to the *Atlantic* to announce that “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” those flummoxed by his recommendations of rearing children in self-selected kinship tribes did not have to wait long. Academics Brad Wilcox, Kay Hymowitz, and others immediately, thoughtfully, and equipped with decades of scholarship, responded. “Yes, David Brooks,” read Hymowitz’s headline, “The Nuclear Family Is the Worst Family Form—Except for All Others.”

This journal, *Family Perspectives*, brings an injection of student-scholar voices into the dialogue.

We hope to strengthen individuals, marriages, and families by engaging with the latest academic findings and by bringing authoritative voices to a younger demographic still wending its way through the excesses of its age. Some of those voices belong to us, others to the experts.

One expert I’ve come to appreciate in whatever we’re calling the last decade—the 2010s?—is Berkeley- and

University-of-Virginia-affiliated clinical psychologist Meg Jay. She specializes in what she calls the “defining decade.” Between ages twenty and thirty, Jay explains in secular, clinical prose featured in the *New York Times*, her books, and elsewhere, we make enormously consequential decisions about school, careers, marriage, and family. Don’t waste the decade, warns Jay, cohabiting with someone you wouldn’t marry, postponing marriage and children, and deciding to take seven or eight years off to work as a barista and travel the world.

We may not appreciate advice like that from a preacher, or from our mothers, but other voices, especially authoritative ones, have a way of getting our attention. Perhaps even too much attention. Therein lies the rub: in clinging too heavily to outside, secular voices of authority, we run the risk of diluting the primacy of prophetic voices. Following religious voices, after all, requires faith, not empirical certainty.

Helpful nudges from academics and philosophers definitely aid and abet the spiritual journey, but such nudges should never substitute for the path itself. Even C. S. Lewis, the quintessential reasoner for Christianity, warned of replacing God with oral arguments. In “The Apologist’s Evening Prayer,” he wrote:

*From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.
Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead
Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.*

In offering up coins that bolster religious reasons for sexual restraint and healthy family formation, then, we at *Family Perspectives* believe that being better informed is more helpful than shallowly so. However, we also believe that experts are no substitute for prophets, though the accumulation of good science over time almost always bolsters prophetic voices.

Hopefully, our contribution helps others navigate the landmines of their age with greater confidence and also offers them reassurance that they’re not crazy, or alone.

Betsy VanDenBerghe, writer, has authored articles for *First Things*, *Washington Post*, *National Review*, *the Ensign*, *RealClearPolitics*, and other publications. She received her MA in English and attended the Radcliffe Publishing Course at Harvard University.