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*I*n discussing marriage and commitment, I will begin with Aristotle, who maintained that man—and also woman—is a social animal. We are utterly dependent upon forming and maintaining relationships with other people.

A person who has always been truly alone winds up being emotionally dead. Of all of the relationships into which people enter, the family is the most important one. We are raised by parents, confronted by siblings, and introduced to peers through our familial roots.

Gordon B. Hinckley, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has written, "There is no environment more conducive to the development and enactment of virtue than the family." And he goes on to quote a wise man who said, "No success in life can compensate for failure in the home." I agree with him completely. The best evidence for the centrality of the family is all about us. We care more about our children than the children of others. We run greater risks to help one of our threatened children or one of our threatened parents than we do to help someone else's. When we go home, we expect to be taken in. Indeed, one person said, "The definition of home is where, if you go there, they have to take you in." On the sidelines during football games, the players wave at the television camera and say, "Hi Mom!"

Some countries, and some people in every country, recognize the importance of social commitments, but hope to

maintain them without what they regard as the inconvenience of marriage. They hope to obtain these advantages, in short, from non-family sources. In Sweden, public officials have made it clear that the laws of that country should give no advantage whatsoever to marriage in relation to other forms of union between men and women, or between men and men or women and women. In France, a law is now in force that allows a willing couple to appear before a clerk and, simply by signing a piece of paper, enter into a union, which, if they later choose to end it, can be undone without any divorce proceedings.¹ A very liberal American law school professor has urged "that marriage should be abolished as a legal category," and be replaced by an arrangement in which society will pay for children to be raised by professional caretakers.² Her views were matched by those of a conservative federal judge, Richard Posner, who argued that conventional marriages foster what he called "puritanical attitudes," and went on to propose that America adopt the Swedish system of favoring cohabitation over marriage, because cohabitation would avoid the fostering of such puritanical attitudes.³

To see what is wrong with these views, whether expressed

by the political left or the political right, shift the analogy away from marriage and toward a business enterprise. Suppose that two people decide to make and sell bread. They can do so by having an oral agreement, or they can enter into an enforceable contract. If they rely on an oral agreement, when one or the other becomes bored or greedy or distrustful, that person can walk away from the arrangement with whatever that person can carry. But if they insist on a written and enforceable contract, ending the partnership will require the agreement of the other party and the approval of the law. As a result of the power of contracts, marriages and business both use them.

The analogy also extends to those who live together. Men and women who cohabit have only a weak incentive to share their resources and to put up with the inevitable emotional bumps and grinds that accompany a married life. In this country, at least, the data show that among cohabiting couples, each member of the couple tends to keep a separate bank account. This means that they keep their personal wealth apart and do not share it. When two members of a cohabiting couple have unequal incomes, they are much more likely to split apart than when

"The definition of home is where,
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a married couple has unequal incomes, or, as is the case with many married couples, where one has no income at all.⁴

In a marriage, we share both our feelings and our wealth, and we know that because we share our love, we share a dependency one with the other. Conversely, cohabitation merely means “living together,” or the phrase I was taught in the 1940s when I was growing up, “shacking up.” Marriage means making an investment in another person.

The difference between marriage and cohabitation is that marriage follows a public, legally-recognized ceremony in which each person swears before friends and family and witnesses to love, honor, and cherish the other person until death does them part. Cohabitation merely means sharing a bed.

Of course, many marriages in this country end in divorce, and divorce has become very easy to arrange in most states. But even in this era of no-fault divorces, ending a marriage must still be done before a magistrate and that magistrate will allocate

the goods and services the couple has in common, distributing in accordance with some formula, such as

the best interest of the child or who seems to be least at fault.

Couples who cohabit before they marry in this country are much more likely to end the marriage, should it follow this cohabitation, with divorce. If a family enters into marriage without having cohabitated in advance, they are much less likely to end their marriage in divorce.⁵ Now, cohabitation may have no harmful effects on some people, as people come in a variety of styles and flavors. But, on the whole, cohabitation is a risky idea.

Cohabiting couples, compared to married ones, experience more cases of physical abuse, are more likely to be murdered, are more likely to be sexually unfaithful, and are more likely to be poor. Children living with cohabiting as opposed to married parents are much more likely to witness their parents' partnership end. The children are much more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, and they are much more likely to be poor.⁶

Now, that is a dramatic picture, which much be qualified by an important fact. Some of the disadvantages of cohabitation that I have just recited result from the fact that, in the United States at least and perhaps in other countries as well, men and women who live together without being married are more likely to be poor and erratic even before they join together. And so some of the effects that I have ascribed to cohabitation may in fact be the result of two people who are ill-equipped either for cohabitation or for marriage.

In the United States, for example, 60 percent of high school dropouts have cohabitated, compared to only half that proportion of college graduates. But in other countries, especially in Scandinavia, cohabitation has become a common way for men and women from upper-middle class backgrounds and highly-educated circumstances to live together. They have, in growing numbers, rejected marriage. Because of these differences, American cohabiting couples are poorer than those you find in Denmark, Finland, or Sweden. And so the grim news I have mentioned about cohabitation may, to some degree as yet unknown, be ascribed to the fact that these people were different before they shared a room.

But the effect in this country must be becoming less important. Every year, we have fewer and fewer poor people, and every year we have more and more cohabiting couples. In 2002, there were five million cohabiting couples, up from half a million 30 years earlier. Even though we have fewer poor people and more cohabiting ones, the tendency I suggest that is implied by these data is that a higher and higher fraction of cohabiting couples have problems because of the fact they are cohabiting and not simply because they enter that relationship with prior disadvantages.

The deleterious effects of cohabitation, whatever they may be, are lost on many young people in America. In a survey, six out of ten high school seniors think it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together



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before getting married because by cohabiting they can find out whether they really get along, despite significant evidence to the contrary.⁷ In 1985, about half of all Americans said there is no reason why single women shouldn't have children. In that same poll, Americans were asked whether it was acceptable if their daughter had a child outside of wedlock. Now, only one out of eight respondents agreed. Apparently, half of us think it's okay for other people's daughters to have children out of wedlock, but far fewer of us think it's okay for our daughters to do the same.⁸

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead put it this way: "Cohabitation is not to marriage what spring training is to baseball."⁹ This tension between our libertarian views about other people and our conventional views about ourselves has made it very hard for people in this country to think seriously about marriage. Almost everyone in this country, when polled, thinks that marriage, in general, is a good idea. They look forward to the possibility of being married. They think, on the whole, that marriage is good for people.

But one-fourth of all children, and over half of all African-American children, are now being raised in single-parent families. There is one large exception to this dramatic increase in the children being raised by unwed mothers. Of Americans who attend church weekly, only one-fourth said that it is morally acceptable to have a child out of wedlock. Among people who seldom or never attend church, nearly three-fourths have the view that it is acceptable to have a child out of wedlock.

The problem of single-parent families is well-known. It is much greater, I think, than the problem of cohabitation. The best research that has been done shows that after controlling for income, growing up with a single head of family—typically a female head of family (you will notice men rarely head families when there is not a wife with them)—makes things worse for the child. Sara McLanahan of Princeton University, and her colleague Gary Sandefur, published a book a few years ago for the Harvard University Press

called *Single Parent Children*, which examined in detail the results of five major longitudinal studies that had been conducted in this country of how people grow up.¹⁰ These are the five most important studies we now have. And in doing so, they concluded that both poverty and being raised in a single-parent family create costs for the child.

After controlling for income, they found that about half the harmful effects that children experience result from growing up in a single-parent family, and that is true of all American ethnic groups.¹¹ After holding income constant, boys in father-absent families were twice as likely as those in two-parent families to go to jail.¹² Girls in father-absent families were twice as likely as those in married families to have an out-of-wedlock birth.

What all of this means for society is easily seen in the streets of our largest cities,

where gangs patrol the roads and commit a disproportionate share of the rapes, assaults, robberies, and murders that our cities experience. And the people in these gangs are people who have turned to gangs in part because they have no fathers, and in a gang they can find what they most need as a young man on the streets of the big city, namely self-defense. We think often of the police as being the principal guarantor of defense in our cities, but that's not quite true. To use a football analogy, the police are the linebackers. The defensive line consists of fathers; and, absent fathers, the police cannot manage this task alone.

We have discovered through analysis of data that there is only a very weak link between unemployment rates and crime rates in this country. There is a small link, but it's so small that it is a virtually a rounding error in the calculations. But my observation is that being from a father-absent family has a profound link on crime, and the data I am aware of support this generalization very strongly. If you're not in the labor force, if you are living in a gang, or have no father, you are almost certain to commit a crime.

Boys in single-parent families are more likely to be idle than be in school, or to be unemployed. They are

more likely to drop out of high school. And these differences are as great for white families as they are for African-American and Hispanic ones. And they're as great for children from relatively well-to-do families as they are for children from disadvantaged families. These problems are not limited to the United States. What we are seeing in the world today, at least in all of the Western world, is, to put it bluntly, the marriage problem. There has been a dramatic increase in the last 40 years in the proportion of children who are born out of wedlock, not only in the United States, but in Canada and most of Europe.

Now, some of this increase that we noticed abroad may be explained by families who live together as cohabiting couples rather than as married couples, and act as if they were truly married. And, although we're not certain yet, these cohabiting parents may act much like married ones and devote themselves to child care. But we also know that there has also been, in Europe and in Canada, a dramatic increase in the proportion of children who are living without fathers at all. So we know the problem they face is not simply whatever problems may be attributed to cohabitation, they are problems that arise because of the non-existence of marriage and the absence of fathers.

In Canada and in most of Europe, there has been a

sharp increase in the proportion of children living in single-parent families. In 1960, only one out of every 10 children in Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, and Great Britain lived with a single parent. Twenty-eight years later, that proportion had doubled.

There are several possible explanations for these transformations. One is that women have entered the workforce, and by becoming economically more independent, they can survive, and in some cases do rather well, with a child and without a husband. These are the "Murphy Brown" mothers about which we once heard so much, but they are relatively rare. Only about four percent of white, unmarried mothers are college graduates. The great majority of unmarried parents have either not finished high school or completed only their high school degrees.

The second possible explanation is the relationship between the number of women and the number of men in society. When women outnumber men, as they do in the United States and in many other countries, they face tougher statistical odds against getting married. The more women there are in proportion to the number of men of equivalent age affects profoundly the rate of illegitimacy and the prospects for being married. When the sex ratio is high—meaning there are more single women than available men—it is harder for women to find a husband, and states in this country with a high sex ratio have produced abnormally high

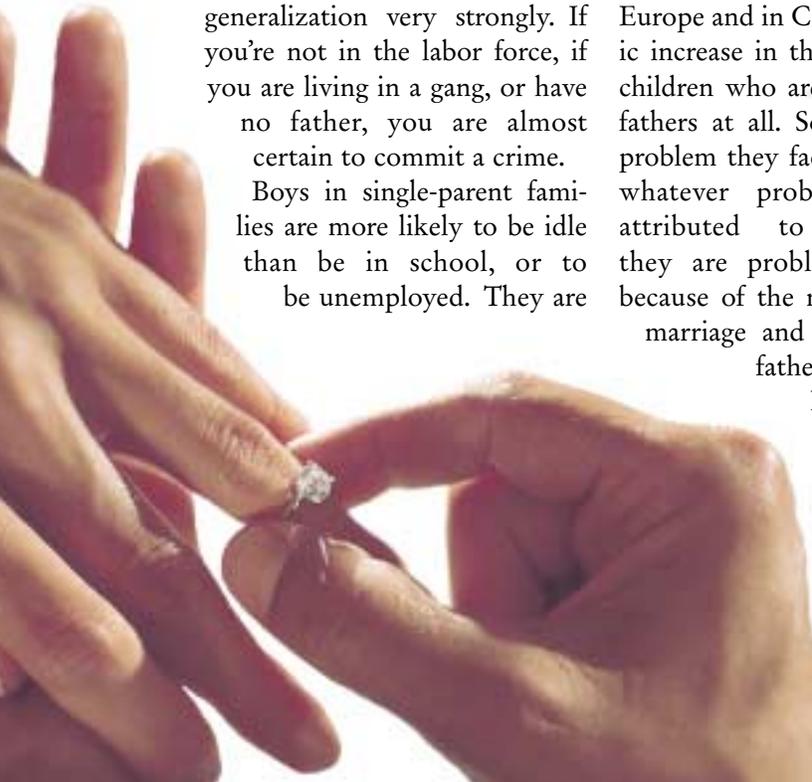


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death rates of poor young men and a high percentage of men in prison. If you send a lot of men to prison, and if they die of murder or automobile accidents while young, even if there is not a war, we will have more women than there are men. And the older these women get, the harder it will be for them to find a husband. The best time to find a husband or wife is when you are in college, which is what I did. It was one of the smartest decisions I ever made. The older you get, the harder it is to find somebody with whom you are likely to live.

The third reason for the increase in single-parent families in this country is the welfare system. The welfare system was created in 1935 to support women who did not have a husband, largely because the husband had been killed in a war or had died in a mining or industrial accident. And so these welfare payments went to unmarried women. And there was a rule in most states that the woman had to be morally suitable, which meant that she could not share her living arrangements with a man to

whom she was not married. But after the Great Depression and the Second World War, the rules changed; and, as a result, the welfare system unintentionally began to encourage women to have children without getting married in the first place. So instead of welfare payments supporting widows, welfare payments began to support teenage brides.

For 20 years after this phenomenon became evident, scholars examining it said the regulations had no effect on the prospects of a woman having a child out of wedlock. But today good research by economists and sociologists has shown that if you look at low-income women and assess their access to welfare, the availability of welfare increases the probability that they will have a child out of wedlock.¹³ Welfare reform is in the air, but, as I will point out, it has done next to nothing to solve this problem.

A fourth reason, and to me the most important one, is that having children out of wedlock or cohabiting with a person to whom you are not married has lost its stigma. We no longer

regard, in most quarters of this country, such behavior as shameful. I spend a lot of time in *The Marriage Problem* trying to sort out the reasons why shame has disappeared and stigma has lost its sting.¹⁴

In the past, this shame was focused on the child, and this may strike you as unfair. The child certainly is not to blame, so why stigmatize the child? Well, this was a way not of trying to stigmatize the child, but of stigmatizing the parents who were responsible for the birth of the child. There have been studies of children born out of wedlock that have been going on in England since the first data were available in the 16th century. (To be clear, I'm not talking about children born to women who were pregnant before they were married. That was quite common in England, it was common in the United States, it was common in Europe. Indeed, in England from its earliest history on, about one third of all the children born in England were born less than nine months after the wedding of the mother and the father.)

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But children who were born to parents who were unmarried faced very severe risks. Those born out of wedlock could not inherit property, and there were no welfare payments to support them. The reality was that if a child were abandoned by its parents, the child would die unless it was taken in by a kindly relative or neighbor. Happily, there were many kindly aunts and neighbors who took them in, but as a consequence of the shame that was visited on the child, the out of wedlock birthrate in England remained remarkably low. Until the beginning of the 18th century, the proportion of all births that were out of wedlock was about 4 percent or less in most English counties. In the 19th century it crept up, but only to about 5 percent. By the 1970s it was over 8 percent. Today it is 30 percent. That increase came about because the state abandoned the penalties it once enforced on persons, because it developed programs to support parents who had children born out of

wedlock, and because it decided that one should no longer regard this action as shameful.

You can see a similar change in the United States if you read carefully the opinions written by the United State Supreme Court. In the late 19th century, just to cite two cases, the Supreme Court spoke of marriage as a “sacred obligation” or a “holy estate.” And one Supreme Court opinion said that marriage was the source of civilization itself. By 1972, only three-quarters of a century after these remarks had passed from the hands of the justices, the court had abandoned any reference to sacred obligations or holy estates, and said instead that marriage is “an association of two individuals, each with a separate emotional and intellectual makeup.” Marriage was once a sacrament, then it became a sacred obligation, and now it is simply a private contract. And for many people, alas, it is not even a contract.

Friedrich Nietzsche would not have been surprised by all this. He predicted that the fami-

ly would “be ground into a random collection of individuals bound together by the common pursuit of selfish ends.” John Stuart Mill may or may not have been surprised, but he certainly would have been pleased. He long argued the marriage should be a private, bargained-for arrangement in which the state should play as small a role as possible.¹⁵

But many women who have gone through this experience have discovered that what Nietzsche predicted and what Mill approved of has been for them a disaster. They may prefer cohabitation, they may shun marriage, they may regard marriage as a trivial inconvenience, but then they discover that cohabitation will not last. And their children will be disadvantaged. Or they may marry, but they will quickly discover that husbands often want new trophy wives and, in order to get them, will find it easy to end the marriage on the basis of a no-fault divorce law. And when the

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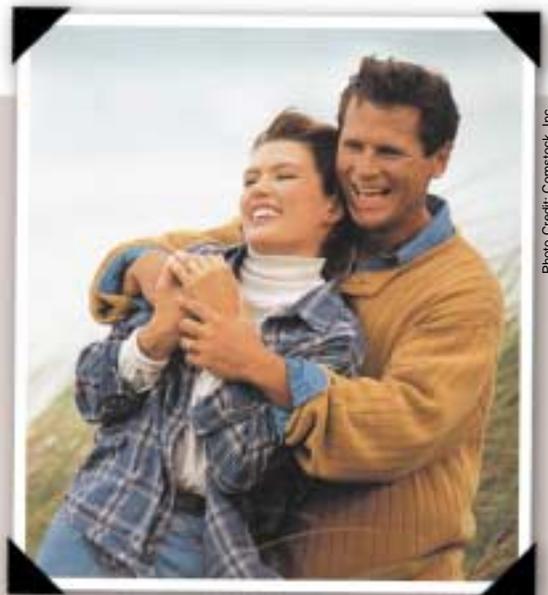


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marriage does end, the women typically discover that, though the courts try to be fair in the allocation of accumulated resources, they will typically be left with too little money with which to support themselves and their children.

Human character arises out of the commitment people make to one another, and marriage is the supreme form of that commitment. When we make marriage less important, we make character less likely. Married people are happier, wealthier, and sexually more satisfied than are unmarried persons or those cohabiting, even controlling for income and education. Married people and their children are less likely to commit crimes.

The problems our society and any society faces is the need to reconcile personal freedom, which we all value, with character. The reconciliation is not impossible in principle. There are many who have struck an appropriate balance between freedom and character, and have found that this balance produces a life that is much more rewarding than either the blind pursuit of freedom or the slavish admiration of character.

For the good life, mere freedom alone is not sufficient. It must work with and support commitment, for out of commitment arises the human character that will guide the footsteps of people navigating the tantalizing opportunities that freedom offers. Freedom and character, again, are not incompatible, but keeping them in balance is a profound challenge for any

culture, and it is a challenge that this culture and the culture of most of Western Europe are now failing to achieve.

There are some small signs that our culture may be regaining its bearings. The crime rate has dropped dramatically, for reasons that have nothing to do with economic cycles. Crimes rates started falling around 1981, and their decline has been fairly consistent since then, both in good economic times and in bad ones. The sharp increase in the percentage of children living with a single parent that began around 1960 has leveled off, and it was about the same in 2003 that it was 13 years earlier. The abortion rate among women under the age of 20 has fallen since 1985, and is about the same today as it was when *Roe vs. Wade* was enacted in 1973. The rate at which children are born to teenaged mothers has declined since 1991, the year at which it hit its peak in this country. In 2000, teenage pregnancy rates for girls ages 15 to 19 were about one-fourth lower than they had been in 1991. Some of this reduction may well result not simply from regaining our cultural bearings, but from the increased use of contraceptive devices. We know that in 2002, the use of such devices had increased by one third since 1988.

Though there's been a decrease in teenage birth rates, an increase in the use of contraceptives, and a leveling off of the proportion of children living in single-parent families, this may be a sign of a culture regaining its bearings, or it may simply be

a modest and temporary gain. We don't know. I will not in my lifetime know the answer to the question of whether this is a permanent cultural shift. It may be the result simply of the exhaustion of potential victims. There are only a certain number of people who are at risk for all of these miseries, and if society afflicts them all, then the rate of increase will have reached its natural apogee, and it cannot statistically go any higher. We do not know what the answer is, but there are some reasons to think that perhaps we have begun to find a culture that has regained its bearings.

There is one additional effect of marriage that may please some and may displease others, but in the interest of intellectual honesty, I will report it. Married people are much more likely to vote for Republican candidates than are unmarried ones. And that is true even after controlling for age, sex, race, income, and education. Data analyzed by Democratic pollster Stanly Greenberg found that after controlling for every other demographic factor, unmarried people were 1.56 times more likely to vote for John Kerry than to vote for George W. Bush. I doubt that marriage itself explains this gap. Perhaps it is the likely result of the fact that married people are more likely to own a home, have a mortgage, pay property taxes, raise children, and worry about living in a good neighborhood. All of these things provide some support for the appeals that are made in red states.

Having recounted how bad things are, you might now expect that I will offer a solution. I will do no such thing. There is no magic bullet, there is no single strategy. There may not even be a collection of strategies that will deal with this problem. Some people want the government to step in and solve it. I recall the remarks of my own dear friend, former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, shortly before he died. He said, "People who believe that the government can do something about this problem know more about the government than I do." We face a cultural transformation, and that cultural transformation has to be altered by ordinary people operating in small communities through voluntary associations and religious organizations to improve matters.

In the case of welfare, which confronted the fact now recognized by most scholars that the existence of welfare payments encourages unmarried women to have children out of wedlock, reform was enacted in 1996 designed to persuade women to seek work rather than welfare. And in most states in the Union, the changes made have been remarkably successful in that sense. Some states, such as Wisconsin, are more skillful than other states, but in virtually every state, the proportion of women eligible for welfare who have gone on welfare has gone down dramatically. But it has had no effect on the rate at which they produce out of wedlock children. And if you consider the issues involved in running

a welfare agency or any government department, you can see why. You can urge your frontline employees to work with women who are seeking welfare payments. It's acceptable to persuade them to find jobs and to refer them to job training programs. You can give them lists of jobs for which they're qualified. If you do these things, your success in the bureaucratic welfare agency will become immediately evident. You will save money for the state, and you will act in accordance with public opinion that wants you to do this very thing.

But now imagine that you're running a welfare agency and you tell your frontline employees to increase marriage rates. Well, now it's a different matter. The effect, if you're successful, will not be measurable. For many years, it may not even be visible. You will not save the state any money, and you will not have public opinion strongly on your side. And so welfare reform has meant that though we have driven down the welfare rolls, we have confronted many children in this country with the following problem. First, you had no father. And now, because she is working every day, you have no mother either. And this throws a burden on the child care systems which I am not sure the child care systems are quite prepared to accept.

Indeed, there is a tendency in American politics, perhaps because of these contradictory forces, to shy away from any discussion of the marriage problem. I have long felt that the

president and others should use their offices as a bully pulpit to address these messages. And various presidents—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush among them—have done so. But these matters are easily set aside by things to which we react more ardently, such as an airplane crash. Once the Supreme Court struck down laws against homosexual conduct, many people became preoccupied with either encouraging or discouraging homosexual marriage. Whatever your views about homosexual marriage, were it adopted nationally, it could at the most affect 2 or 3 percent of the American population. Meanwhile, cohabitation, divorce, and single-parent families affect most of the people in this country. But it is not something about which we now talk.

I think the frontier for thinking and research in this area is to look at the many efforts that are being undertaken by private (in some cases governmental, and in some cases religious) organizations to solve the marriage problem. There are countless such efforts, such as the Marriage Savers Program, the Promise Seekers, and various school curricula that emphasize the advantages of marriage. The difficulty with these programs is that with only a handful of exceptions, they have never been evaluated, so we don't know whether they work. And the ones that have been evaluated have been evaluated only for three months in one case or a year in another. So we don't know whether they have long term effects. And a school for

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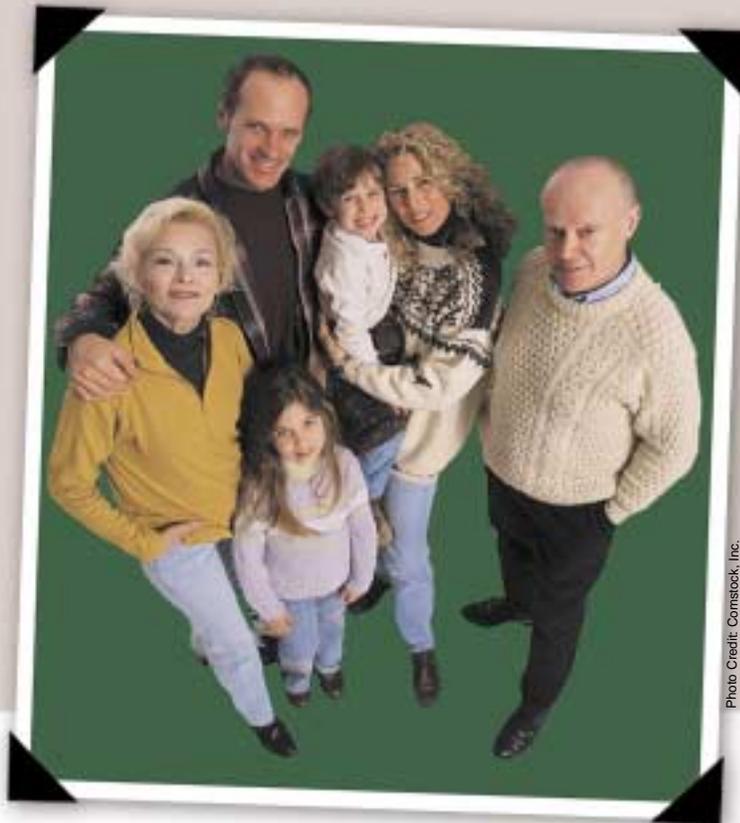


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family, marriage life, and social science is well advised to seize upon this problem and see if we can devise a system whereby the many efforts that are now underway can be given a formal and independent evaluation to find out what's working. And once we know what's working—not simply what people claim is working—we should broadcast across campuses such as this and throughout the country how these things are working so that other people can take confidence from them.

James Q. Wilson is the former James Collins Professor of Management at UCLA and Shattuck Professor of Government at Harvard, and is now the Ronald Reagan Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University. He is the author of several books, including *The Moral Sense* and *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*, and has served on a number of

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