The Effects of Relational Poverty: Healing our culture

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The Effects of Relational Poverty: Healing our Culture

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One of the most vexing challenges of our day is a profound hunger for connection, evidenced by an epidemic of loneliness, relational poverty, and increasing mental health challenges. We are born to be in deep connection with others. A cultural focus on radical individualism with the associated ruptures in family stability, decreased religiosity and community engagement have increased loneliness in spite of the seeming “connectivity” of a world swimming in social media. The deepest loneliness stems from disruption and disorder in family life, profoundly evidenced in the effects of ruptured or never formed family relationships. It is also evidenced in the effects of the fragmentation of sexuality, untethered from its purpose in binding husband and wife to create a bond strong enough that a child’s heart can rely upon it. In answer to this relational fracturing, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers covenant belonging and connection. Within the most intimate and profound relationship of all, we experience the wholeness that enables the capacity for deep connection and intimacy in all other relationships. The revealed understanding of the nature of our covenant relationship with Christ and His work in enabling our eternal bonding to one another is the truth we need to begin healing our profound hunger for connection.

Keywords: connection, covenants, Jesus Christ, loneliness, relationships

An Epidemic of Loneliness

In 2017, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared an epidemic of loneliness, singling it out as the most common serious pathology of our day. At the time, 40% of adults in America reported feeling lonely (Murthy, 2021). In the years since, the epidemic has grown. A national survey by The Human Flourishing Project at Harvard University (2021) found that 61% of young people aged 18-25 reported feeling lonely “frequently” or “almost all the time.” This trend appears to be part of a simultaneous increase in mental health challenges, particularly among adolescents and young adults. By 2021, the share of young adults who reported being “very happy” fell to 25%, the lowest level since being measured (Wilcox & Stone, 2019). Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program further confirmed that the well-being of young adults has dramatically declined relative to older age groups, the result of an apparent crisis in meaning and identity linked to loneliness and decreased relational connection (Chen et al., 2022).
Social media has been implicated in the striking increase in mental health challenges fed by isolation and loneliness (Twenge, 2020), but perhaps the epidemic of loneliness fed social media’s success. Rampant individualism, workism, diminished community engagement, and less religiosity laid the groundwork for alienating individuals from the institutions that have provided social grounding across time. Robert Bellah and his colleagues warned of this in their sociological overview of the individualistic orientation sweeping every dimension of American life. As they described, utilitarian and expressive individualism enabled individuals “to think of commitments—from marriage and work to political and religious involvement—as enhancements of the self rather than as moral imperatives.” (Bellah et al., p. 47). Relational obligations that appeared to limit individual expression and “freedom to choose,” were to be abandoned for the higher cause of personal fulfillment.

The implications have been profound. In fact, evidence suggests that the deepest loneliness stems from disruption and disorder in the core relationships of family life (Dalrymple, 2023). The last 50 years brought a dramatic increase in divorce and non-marital childbearing, with the attended fracturing and developmental risk, especially for children. This accompanied a dramatic drop in the marriage rate. In 1965, there were 76.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried people. By 2021, that rate had fallen to 28 marriages per 1,000 (Bowling Green State University, 2022).

Yet the link between marriage and flourishing seems to have only become more striking. In 2023, marriage was identified as “the most important differentiator” of being happy or unhappy in the United States (Peltzman, 2023), and being reared by stably, married parents has become even more strongly linked to positive outcomes for children (Kearney, 2023).

The Truth About Human Beings

All of this points to a fundamental, undeniable reality. Human beings are not designed for self-actualized, pleasure-seeking autonomy. We are deeply relational, hardwired for connection. Beginning in utero, development emerges from radical dependence. Once born, every infant’s primary task is to establish a bond of deep emotional connection through which they can experience the consistent love and responsiveness that lays the foundation for their sense of identity and relational capacity. In deeply bonding with another, they come to know who they are. Someday, those infants will care for aging parents, as the profound cycle of dependence and care continues.

What was once theoretical is now so consistently captured in human experience that it has become undeniable. No person can really flourish “unless they have other persons who know them and reflect back to them who they are.” As German analyst Frieda Fromm-Reichman wrote, “The longing for interpersonal intimacy stays with every human being from infancy through life, and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss.” (Lepore, 2020). It is in loving and being loved that we are “most fully and distinctively” ourselves (Crouch, 2022, p. 16). Intimate connection between human beings in a community where they are seen and known is what human beings are made for. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy captured this reality when he described loneliness as “feeling homeless.” In his words, “To be at home is to be known” (Murthy, 2020, xxii).

Home: The First Essential Community

Home is the most primal and essential community where the realities of our deeply relational nature play out. Decades of research and hundreds of studies have led to one of the most “law-like” findings in social science: the foundational, core relationships of family profoundly shape wellbeing, identity, and relational capacity. Individual development emerges from within family relationships. The effect of the disintegration of these core relationships is painfully captured in the noted decline in human wellbeing.

Marriage and Children’s Wellbeing

In 1960, the out-of-wedlock childbearing rate in the U. S. was 5%. By 2014, that percentage had increased to 41% where it has hovered since (Michas, 2023; VerBruggen, 2017). For decades, researchers have explored what being born outside the bonds of marriage has meant in the lives of children. Hundreds of studies comparing outcomes for children born to single parents indicate increased risks in every developmental area – poverty, involvement in crime,
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failing in school, lower graduation rates, physical health, psychological distress, mental illness, suicide, exposure to aggravated parenting, and abuse, when compared to children raised by their married biological parents (Moore et al., 2002).

Since 1960, the percentage of cohabiting couples with children has also increased by nearly 17 times. Children in these families are, on average, also significantly more likely to experience challenges in every developmental area (Manning, 2015). Some of this risk is related to the fact that they are much more likely than children of married parents to witness their parents’ breaking up, creating instability that is disruptive for children’s development (Musick & Michelmore, 2018; Elf-Hage, 2015). These risks are exacerbated by the fact that being born to unmarried or cohabiting parents is also associated with persistent poverty (Wilcox & DeRose, 2017). In such an environment, children struggle accessing resources, but are also at increased risk for abuse—physically, sexually, and emotionally—because of the revolving door of romantic relationships experienced by their single parent. The National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect found that children living with a single parent who had a live-in partner had eight times the rate of maltreatment, over 10 times the rate of abuse, and nearly eight times the rate of neglect compared to children living with married biological parents (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Making the choice to end an abusive marital relationship can be a courageous and beneficial decision because it takes the individual and their children out of a destructive environment. However, in general, children whose parents divorce also experience increased risks in every developmental domain, and are at least two times more likely to experience serious social, emotional, or psychological challenges (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In addition to the economic challenges that often result, children who experience the divorce of their parents are more likely to describe a feeling of “inner division,” loneliness, and exile, as they try to bridge the gap between their parents’ separate worlds. Children are, after all, the embodiment of their parents’ union.

As Elizabeth Marquardt (2005) found in extensive interviews of adults whose parents had divorced during their childhoods, the rupture of their parents’ relationship seemed to trigger a rupture in their own core sense of identity and belonging. In describing her own feelings and those she interviewed: “A deep and enduring moral drama was ignited the moment our parents parted... The divorce left us with a permanent inner conflict between our parents’ worlds. This was a conflict for which we could imagine no resolution, a conflict for which many of us thought we had only ourselves to blame.” (Marquardt, 2005, p. 17). With parents no longer pulling their diverse ways, perspectives, and worlds together for children, divorce requires children to traverse those worlds on their own, living out the conflict of parents’ differing values and ways of living while trying to bridge them. Yearning for belonging, they continually fear exclusion because to gain one parent is to lose the other. As a result, many described a divided sense of self, less secure sense of home, loneliness, and even exile, the spiritual name for a persistent feeling of inner division (Marquardt, 2005). Deep within, many long for the original intactness of their being, the loving union of the mother and father who brought them into being, and whose union they embody (Lopez, 2015).

Of course, marriage does not guarantee that children receive the best nurturing setting, but a preponderance of evidence suggests that marriage “offers the most reliable way to promote these ends” (Cabrera et al., 2022). Marriage is the most consistent structure for children to receive the essential gifts of two committed parents, a stable home life, economic resources, and the experience of being wanted and welcomed (Cabrera et al., 2022). Even when controlling for equal levels of “parental attention, income, family stability, and other factors,” children with married parents have better outcomes (Ribar, 2015). More fundamental than economic resources, marriage is designed to offer children a sense of wholeness in the loving stability of the binding between the mother and father who came together to create their being.

Marriage and Adult Wellbeing

Children are not the only ones who benefit from the bond of marriage, however. Decades ago, scholars began to observe evidence of a strong positive impact on adults from marriage in nearly every dimension of wellbeing (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Men who
marry tend to work harder, smarter, and more successfully. Married men are also more emotionally and physically satisfied with intimacy. They tend to live longer, partly because they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors knowing they are needed by others who depend on them (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2017).

A recent, rigorous longitudinal study comparing outcomes for women who were married verses those who were unmarried, confirmed similar findings for women (Chen et al., 2023). Marriage was associated with moderate increases in happiness, purpose in life, and hopefulness, in addition to moderate declines in depression and loneliness. A follow up study 25 years later identified substantial positive effects for marriage on health including less smoking, heart disease, stroke, and “all-cause mortality,” even after factoring in potential health risks such as the stress of raising young children, and the possibility of divorce.

Evidence further indicates that in spite of a dramatic decrease in the marriage rate, Millennials continue to experience “the financial, emotional, and physical benefits” of marriage documented for earlier generations (Willoughby, 2022). Those who are married are more likely to report satisfying and stable relationships, less depression, more healthy behaviors and better health. As Willoughby (2022) summarizes, “These findings confirm that married couples still reap the benefits of the long-term stable relationship that their union provides.”

Researchers from Harvard University’s Human Flourishing Project conclude that marriage “seems to satisfy a number of social and psychological needs,” including companionship and affection, socialization and intimacy while ensuring a profoundly stable source of social support. In their words, marriage “promotes human flourishing in many ways at once, both meeting and harmonizing the distinctive needs and desires of men, women, and children” (Case & VanderWeele, 2023). The importance of marriage in wellbeing begs us to ask whether a society “can long endure” the persistent and profound marginalization of this essential social ordering (Case & VanderWeele, 2023). The epidemic of loneliness, increase in mental health challenges and decrease in flourishing particularly among adolescents and young adults, suggests that our social experiment with abandoning marriage has left us untethered from the essential social structures upon which human beings and their development depend.

**Sexual Fragmentation and Wellbeing**

Much of this untethering has been shaped by our social experiment with sexual relationships. The breaking apart of sexual relations from marriage that resulted from the sexual revolution of the 1960s initiated a dramatic increase in nonmarital childbearing and with it, increased risks for children. The disruptive psychological effects of bonding sexually, sharing part without the whole, then severing what was meant to be a total obligation have also been devastating for women and men.

**Effects on Women**

The modern feminist effort for women’s equality allied itself with sexual liberation believing the real source of women’s inequality lay in pregnancy and childbirth. With widespread access to contraception and abortion available on demand, a woman in Margaret Sanger’s words, is no longer “chained to her place through the maternal functions of her nature,” but could now exert total control over her reproductive function (Sanger, 1921). Freed from the consequences of their fertility, the assumption was that women could now engage sexually at will, like men, without consequence.

Few of these women, however, were ever informed that casual, consensual sex is associated with decreased mental health (Wesche et al., 2020), or that it would increase the risk of divorce in the future (Willoughby et al., 2023). Most difficult of all, out-of-wedlock childbirths skyrocketed (Michas, 2023) in pace with abortions (Diamant & Mohamed, 2023), and increasing numbers of fathers had no responsibility for their children (Hemez & Washington, 2021). Instead of being “liberated,” women found themselves choosing between destroying the fragile, dependent life their bodies were designed to create and protect or trying to rear children to maturity on their own.

In addition, sex outside of committed relationships became expected, bringing with it increased risk for nonconsensual sexual engagement. According to the Association of American Universities (2019), 26.4 percent of undergraduate women reported non-
consensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent in 2019. More recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) reported that one in ten adolescent girls experienced unwanted sexual contact in 2021. By denying the essential sexual asymmetry of men and women and falsely assuming “sexual relations without consequence,” sexual liberation brought a tragic twist to women’s liberation (Bachiochi, 2023).

Three decades into the sexual revolution, it also became apparent that women were being widely sexualized. The American Psychological Association (2007) attempted to study the prevalence of sexualizing messages in media and the broader culture, and to assess their impact. As defined by the APA (2007), sexualization occurs when a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, when a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy, and when a person is objectified, that is, made into a thing for other’s sexual use, or when sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. The report concluded that girls and women were being sexualized in every medium—television, music videos, lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, advertising. The negative effects were significant in a variety of domains, including “cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality and attitudes and beliefs.” Specifically, sexualization was linked to impaired cognitive functioning, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, self-objectification and diminished sexual health (APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007).

Effects on Men

Women and children were not the only ones to experience the disruptive and fragmenting effects of sex untethered from the commitment of marriage and the creation of children. The realities of men’s languishing have also begun to break into cultural consciousness (Reeves, 2022). Since the 1960s, the share of men in the workforce has seen a steady decline, and a growing percentage of working-age men are choosing not to work at all. At the same time, women have increasingly surpassed men in educational attainment by growing margins. The gender gap that once meant men were more likely to have a bachelor’s degree than women has flipped the other way, with no signs of slowing. And it is a gap that appears long before college (Reeves, 2022).

This languishing is most painfully exposed in the dramatic increase in “deaths of despair” where the fastest rising death rates in the U.S. are from drug overdoses, suicide and alcoholic liver disease among white men who have not earned college degrees (Case & Deaton, 2015; Introcaso, 2021). French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1897) insightfully and poignantly labeled these deaths of despair, “alienated” suicides, resulting from a lack of social connection, sense of being needed, and a perception of communal indifference (Introcaso, 2021).

The dramatic decrease in the marriage rate has played a significant role in this story of male languishing. Not only does marriage embed a man within a social network where he is needed, it also emerges as a powerful catalyst in encouraging men to learn, to work, to save, and to live because others are so dependent on him (Lerman & Wilcox, 2014). Economic forces have played a role in the decreased marriage rate. The decline of stable, well-paying, manufacturing jobs, especially among less educated men, has compounded the problem, making working class men, in particular, less marriageable (Laerman & Wilcox, 2014).

As Regnerus (2017) concluded, however, easy sexual access outside of marital commitment has also played a significant role. Men today do not need to become marriageable. In Baumeister and Voh’s (2012) words, “young men can skip the wearying detour of a getting education and career prospects to qualify for sex. Nor does he have to get married and accept all those costs, including promising to share his lifetime earnings and forego other women forever. Female sex partners are available without all that...Sex has become free and easy...” This has translated into fewer marriageable men, less commitment, and a more sexually permissive climate where women are easily objectified and receive less in exchange, but it has also played a role in enervating men, leaving them languishing.

These realities bear witness that sexual intimacy is not just an activity we are entitled to engage in for personal pleasure. Sexual intimacy either honors the soul of another, or trivializes, diminishes and abuses the soul of another. Indeed, the sanctity of life is rooted in the meaning of the sexual act through which life
is created. When it is tampered with, misused, or pil- laged from another, the effects are long lasting, dam- aging and tremendously painful. When sex is cheap, souls are cheap.

Development From Within Relationship

The effects of relational fracturing underscore this insight from the Great Sufi, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee: “If we follow the path of any pain, any psychological wounding, it will lead us to this one primal pain: the pain of separation” (Lee, 1999). We are not, in fact, designed for self-actualized, pleasure-seeking autono- my. We are deeply relational beings, designed for radical dependence and connection.

This is perhaps most powerfully exhibited in infant development. Over the last decade, unparalleled progres- s in the field of neuroscience has confirmed that the development of the infant’s mind and body needs to occur within the context of a relationship with an- other deeply invested mind and body (Schore, 2016). From the moment the infant leaves the womb, she is searching, communicating, interacting—primed to sensitively perceive and seek out a particular caregiver, first her mother’s smell, tone of voice, and touch for whom she already demonstrates a preference (Schore, 2017). The mother is also psycho-biologically primed to establish the bond through which the emotional communication that is essential for brain develop- ment can occur. Face-to-face, body-to-body, sound-to- sound, and right-brain-to-right-brain, they communi- cate, reading one another’s faces with a specific focus on the eyes (Schore, 2014).

In the process, the mother regulates the emotions of the infant who cannot yet self-regulate, by matching his inner emotional state, upregulating negative feel- ings, and maximizing positive feelings (Schore, 2014). Meanwhile, the stress hormone cortisol drops, the bonding hormone oxytocin is activated, and cardio- vascular systems, immune systems, and brain states in baby and mother, are calmed and regulated (Schore, 2016). It is a profoundly intimate process even with its messy and consistent ruptures, as another soul is built. From the very beginnings of life, healthy development depends upon and emerges from within strong, re- sponsive, loving relationships.

Development Within Divine Covenant Relationship

This truth is not only critical for the core relation- ships of family life. In fact, it only elucidates the im- portance of what we are learning about the significant meaning and power of our individual relationship with God. Insights about our relationship with God have taken on new meaning in the current cultural context where the negative effects of fractured family relation- ships and their importance in development have be- come even clearer. For centuries, poets and musicians and religious mystics have recognized the persistent reality of a sense of longing in each of us. It fills the music we are drawn to, and is the fountainhead of cre- ation in all the arts (Cain, 2022). What is it we are longing for? The Great Sufi, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (Vaughan-Lee, 1999, p. 78) describes:

There are many people who feel the unhappiness of a homesick soul and yet do not know its cause... The longing of the heart is the memory of when we were together with our Beloved. The pain of separation is our awakening to the knowledge that somewhere we are, [we were], united with God. The heart longs for God, and seeks to find its true Beloved.

Religious adherents of the Abrahamic faiths have long been aware of the Abrahamic covenant, the bind- ing relationship God established anciently with Abra- ham and Sarah and through them, to their posterity and all the world. For Latter-day Saints, in particular, covenant has taken on profound and new meaning in recent years. According to the prophet and president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russell M. Nelson (2022), through covenant, we for- malize an eternal binding with God “that allows him to bless and change us.” In doing so, “we leave neutral ground forever,” making possible access to “a special kind of love and mercy,” known in Hebrew as hesed. Hesed is not just positive emotion. It is a loving power in which one is “able to render assistance to the needy party” through a deep and enduring commitment be- tween the two (Muehlstein, 2021).

Old Testament history makes clear that God yearns to be in deep, binding relationship with us (Muehl-stein, 2021). His desire to bind Himself to us in cov- enant relationship pierces through the alienation we experience because of separation from Him, and our
ruptured relationships with one another. His covenant relationship with us is the truest intimacy, offering us the experience of being known and loved in fullness by a being who sees all that we are and all that we are not, including our pain, weaknesses, sins, mistakes, yearnings and desires. In our honest willingness to show Him all of who we are, and what we are experiencing, He covers us in tenderness and mercy. In a manner that parallels the powerful mother-infant attachment relationship yet is infinitely more profound, a covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ offers us the relationship through which our souls can grow, learn our identity, experience meaning, and know love, in its purest form.

As mortals, we fear that our broken relationships, pain and loss in being single, never married, divorced, infertile, struggling in our marriage, having suffered abuse, wrestling with questions of gender or sexuality, or any other seeming difference from the ideal, mark us as less worthy, creating feelings that we do not belong. Instead, in covenant relationship, our Redeemer, says, “Come. Share it all with me.” Through the prophet Isaiah, He declares, “I am with you…I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Savior. Thou wast precious in my sight…and I have loved thee. Fear not: for I am with thee.” He answers the pain and loss that is woven into the fabric of our mortal experience, with the purest form of love, covenant relationship, entering into it with us, and in doing so changing its quality. The Hebrew word for sacrifice, korban, means “to draw closer.” Through His atoning sacrifice for us, the Lord, Jesus Christ draws closer, sharing our pain in the most profound form of intimacy. Covenant offers us a God who in David Holland’s words, is “fully present in our pain. And that presence has the power to save.” This is “a God who emerges as a perfect, experienced companion in a shared pain and as a willing shield to the pain that could destroy us.” It is the intimacy of that shared connection that provides the power through which our pain is “rendered redemptive” (Holland, 2017).

To some degree, all of our relationships will be fraught with challenges, stretching and loss. Ironically perhaps, our deepest pains will stem from disruption and disorder in the family relationships we yearn to be a haven of love and belonging, trust and intimacy. Only God can make us whole. Only God can heal and bring oneness. And that is exactly what He has covenanted to do. This is the sacred work of Christ, in covenant, to enable us to experience divine oneness in relationship with God, with our families, with all, forever.

Through ordinance-administered covenant, His sanctifying enabling power, or grace, is allowed to enter us and change us into beings that are capable of being closer to Him, and capable of being ever closer to others. This is why His redeeming act is so often referred to as, “The At-one-ment.” By taking upon Himself our experience, and offering redeeming power to reconcile the persistent and pervasive ruptures in our relationships, He heals and creates oneness. We find that He is the great healer, the repairer of the breach, the Restorer, reconciling us to ourselves, to one another, and to Him.

**Conclusion**

We are deeply relational beings, designed for love and connection, with God, and with one another. In the last fifty years we have seen a pervasive rupturing of core family relationships in divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and sexual fragmentation. The effects have been profound including increased risks for children in every developmental domain, extensive sexualization of women and profoundly decreased mental health among young women, and the languishing of men. Culturally we witness a profound hunger for connection, evidenced by an epidemic of loneliness, relational poverty, and increasing mental health challenges. The deepest loneliness stems from not forming core family relationships, and experiencing their disruption and disorder.

In answer to these vexing challenges, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers truth about covenant belonging and connection. Insights into the profound nature of covenant relationship with God is being poured out. These insights witness that within this most intimate and profound relationship, we can experience the wholeness that creates in us the capacity for deep connection and intimacy in all our relationships, healing our fractured realities. The revealed understanding of the nature of our covenant relationship with Christ and His work in enabling our eternal bonding to one another is the foundation for healing our profound hunger for connection.
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