

Family values just don't have the stuffing anymore

It's that time of year again. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day, the day when most Americans go home to be with their families.

We gather around the table, eat the "Melleagris Gallapovo" (turkey) and praise Mom for the stuffing, which is even better than last year's. We tell each other everything that's happened since last year, excluding the embarrassing parts that we don't want Mom and Dad to know about. And we get to hear Grandpa tell the same stories that he told last year and the year before, and everybody laughs politely even though the joke about the outhouse at the old farm in Nebraska wasn't that funny the first time he told it.

And then everybody goes back to where they came from. We go back to college and draw a sigh of relief because this year's Happy Family Thanksgiving Gathering is over and done with. We've fulfilled our obligation, and there's a whole year until the next time, unless we're going back home for the winter holidays, that is.

Perhaps this is a good time to stop for a moment and think a little about the family. Not our own family, but *the* family. The family as a social institution, that is.

Political pundits have long proclaimed the death of the American family; or if it's not dead yet, at least it lives on artificial life support. Statistics



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seem to support this claim: If you get married tomorrow, you will, statistically speaking, get divorced sooner or later. Most people do.

And the media consistently tell us that if you're not divorced yet, chances are your family life isn't very happy. We didn't need John and Lorena Bobbit to tell us that there are dysfunctional families out there, but the case of the severed penis — despite all the prurient hysteria that surrounded it — certainly seems to illustrate this point.

So what brought about this sickness of the American family? First, we'll have to ask ourselves whether this is merely a question of perception. Perhaps the institution of the family never was such a great idea. Perhaps families never really were happy. Perhaps people just didn't talk about their unhappiness in the past. Perhaps the Lorena Bobbits of the Age of Innocence wanted to mutilate their husbands' genitals. They just didn't have the guts to do it.

Perhaps. But somehow, I doubt

it. I think that if we are to understand the decline of the American family, we must look at a much deeper societal tendency. It has its root in the ideology of this nation, as it was written down in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It's about the way Americans value freedom more than anything else, and it can be summed up in one word: individualism.

We regard individualism as something positive in this country. We think everybody has the right to have dreams and pursue those dreams, as long as they don't harm others in their pursuit. And we love the underdog with the strange, unconventional ideas that the establishment laughs at — until she realizes her ideas, crushes the establishment, and becomes the establishment herself.

That's America. That's what built this country. Strong, independent people who could succeed because they had the freedom to live their dreams.

So we teach our children to be strong and independent. We teach them that it's important to have dreams, and that everybody has the right to wish for a better tomorrow. But not only that: We teach our children that they have the right to live their dreams, to pursue all their desires. "If you want it," we tell them, "then go for it. It's your right as an individual."

But have you ever thought of the fact that this individualism, extolled in so many political speeches, may be incompatible with the idea of the family? After all, a family is a community, and for people to live happily together in a community, they must sacrifice some of their individual liberties.

It sounds obvious, but for a lot of people it isn't. A lot of people go into marriage and family life with the notion that they're still going to be able to pursue all their dreams and live out all of their individual liberties. They think that they have the right to demand instant gratification of all their desires, be they material, spiritual, or sexual, even if it means that they'll pursue their happiness at the expense of their spouse's and their children's. People today spend less and less time with their families and more and more time with their work, their hobbies, and in front of the television set.

That's why a lot of people get divorced these days.

I don't know if adultery is the most common cause of the breakup of marriages. But I think most of the breakups occur because one of the spouses is being unfaithful. Not necessarily with someone else, though. Most marriages break up because the spouses love *themselves* more than one another.

I'm not saying that people are immoral. I'm just saying that

they behave exactly the way you'd expect them to behave in a culture that emphasizes individualism more than community values.

Perhaps it's too late to save the American family. Perhaps individualism has become such an ingrained part of our cultural value system that we can never again return to the solid family structures of the past. And, considering the way this structure often inhibited the liberty of women and perpetuated racial and economic gaps, perhaps the death of the American family isn't worth mourning after all.

But I happen to believe that a lot of good things can come from the family. And I also happen to believe that a lot of bad things can come out of the breakdown of the family. I don't think it's an oversimplification to say that the breakdown of the family is one of the primary causes of increased crime, violence, hate and general unhappiness in our society.

The American family may be dying, but Thanksgiving is here to remind us that the idea of the family may still be worth pursuing. So this Thanksgiving, let's honor the institution of the family, whether you think it deserves a commemoration or a celebration.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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