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"Traditional family values" inconsistent with reality

The upstanding, church-going, traditional family man is the person most likely to be a wife and child abuser

BY IVY YOUNG

I want to talk today about Reverend Sheldon's fierce determination to preserve "traditional family values" and how those values really play themselves out in American family life today.

The "traditional family": father-breadwinner; mother-homemaker; and the children. That construct of the nuclear family defines approximately 10 percent of American families today. Ninety percent of us, then live outside Sheldon's view of how the world should be.

So how do Americans define family? According to a 1989 poll conducted by the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, the majority of those surveyed (74 percent) defined family, not in a legalistic sense, but by function, as a group of people who love and care for one another.

For lesbians and gay men that definition is no different. For us, family is a social institution of inclusion, not exclusion. Perhaps we are more fortunate than most; we get to choose our families. And the families we create are not, as Representative William Dannemeyer would have you believe, "...filled with despair." On the contrary, in our families there is a keen sense of joy and celebration. Because despite the ravages of hatred, and in the face of virulent homophobia, we create and sustain gentle and nurturing unions.

As for our children, there are thousands and thousands of them in this country who are part of lesbian and gay families. We hope we are teaching our children the values of love and compassion, not bigotry and hatefulness. We hope we are teaching our children not just to tolerate, but to respect and celebrate the diversity of life on this planet.

Let's look at what is happening in many of Sheldon's "traditional families" in America today.

Fifty percent of American marriages end in divorce. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, three to four million women a year are abused by their husbands or boyfriends; every 18 seconds a woman is battered by her spouse; 30 percent of female homicide victims die at the hands of

their husbands or boyfriends. That's four women a day who die as a result of domestic violence. Spousal abuse, according to the US Surgeon General, is the number one cause of injury to women in the US.

I won't burden you with all the current statistics on child abuse and sexual assault. Here are just a few: according to a survey conducted by Richard Gelles and Murray Strauss, more than 10 parents per one thousand said they beat their child at least once a year. And, every year, one child in one thousand faces a parent with a weapon.

It's interesting to note that according to the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the typical incestuous family tends to be that family which rigidly adheres to traditional family roles and gender stereotypes. And the upstanding, church-going, traditional family man is the person most likely to be a wife and child abuser. Here is that "traditional family" value as expressed by Sheldon: "I love my children, though I've broken a lot of yardsticks over their butts. They never hit me back. That was often the only way I could control them."

It seems Sheldon's definition of family is found in the first entry under family in the Oxford English Dictionary: "the servants of a house."

Unfortunately, the statistics I've cited are the reality of what is happening in thousands of homes across this nation. These are not the family values lesbians and gay men wish to perpetuate.

Let's look now at some of the efforts the Coalition for Traditional Values has made in its attempt to "strengthen and support" the family.

In California, CTV has urged its followers to oppose a state child care bill similar to the federal measure that garnered overwhelming support in Congress. Does that stance by CTV aid the thousands of working parents in California who struggle daily to find adequate, affordable daycare for their children? Does it strengthen those families?

Again in California, the Coalition for Traditional Values vehemently opposes a bill that would recognize Vesper Marriages. The idea of Vesper marriage has been put forward as a way to resolve some of the problems

faced by many of our senior citizens. Widows and widowers who find companions to share the autumn of their lives, are threatened with the loss of pensions and other entitlements if they remarry. Vesper marriage would recognize the relationships those elders create, while not jeopardizing the benefits they so desperately need. But, CTV says absolutely no. Sheldon says he speaks for compassion and righteousness. Where is the compassion in that opposition?

Needless to say, CTV cohorts in San Francisco led the charge against the Domestic Partnership Ordinance that was unanimously passed by that city's Board of Supervisors. (The law was repealed by a mere 1,700 votes.) What was the danger as perceived by the Coalition for Traditional Values? The ordinance provided only that unmarried couples, heterosexual and homosexual, could register as a couple and declare their commitment. It also provided bereavement leave and hospital visitation rights to those same committed couples. Is that such an enormous threat?

Is Sheldon's "traditional family" so fragile that it could not survive the mere thought of an unmarried partner visiting his or her lover in a hospital?

Finally, I would ask you to think back to other times when the call to defend traditional values filled the air. "Kinder, Kirche, Küche" (Children, Church and Kitchen) was the cry of fascists in Europe as they exterminated all those who were different. Much closer to home, and unfortunately, not too long ago men like Bull Connor, Ross Barnett, George Wallace and Lester Maddox also urged their followers to uphold the traditional values that allowed racism and bigotry to flourish in this country.

Threats to the American family do not come from the desire of lesbians and gay men to create loving relationships. No, the threat to the family is poverty and economic injustice, ignorance and inadequate education, homelessness and hunger. Let Sheldon and the Coalition for Traditional Values put what energy and resources they have into combatting these scourges of American family life. We would all benefit from that agenda.

Ivy Young is director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Family Project. The above statement was delivered at a press conference in Washington, D.C., on January 26. The press conference was held in opposition to the Coalition for Traditional Values and the Rev. Louis Sheldon.

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