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Neither Sen. Dole nor President Clinton were speaking of either families or villages.

# Families, Metaphysical Dreams, and Villages

G. Daniel Harden and Joshua K.T. Harden

In the Great Election Campaign of 1996 which Wasn't, there was some light sparring for a few weeks on the topic of whether children needed families or villages for their nurture and care. The exchange got nowhere at least in part because in both cases the presidential candidates had failed to define carefully either family or village. Both were using these terms to promote their domestic agendas, and a general understanding was not achieved.

When Robert Dole stated flatly that it didn't take a village to raise a child but rather a family, he was certainly not talking about the family as traditionally defined. He gave every indication of eulogizing what his political adversaries summarily dismiss as the mythical family of Ward and June Cleaver or of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson. While even these nostalgic pictures from the 1950s are more attractive than many of their dysfunctional counterparts in 1997, they too fail to represent what during most of history was seen as the functional family. The case can be made that the Cleaver and Nelson families themselves represented a decadent form of the traditional family. For many reasons the extended family and the entire set of kinship relationships that were once associated with it were already in grave distress by the 1950s. The family has traditionally been seen as a very extended sort of kinship alliance including aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins so far removed that it was only realized that there was "some connection". In other words: perhaps there isn't that much difference between the traditional family and what President Clinton describes as a village.

But that isn't quite right either. The village that the President talks about isn't really very similar to the villages from which the African saying that "It takes a village to raise a child" comes. Those villages were almost always associated on kinship. The villagers shared their way of looking at the world and at the people who inhabited it. They were largely of like mind in terms of human origins, purposes, and destinations. They were secure in their knowledge, for the most part, what the world

was meant to be and agreed as to how to get there. In the words of Richard Weaver the villagers shared a *metaphysical dream*.<sup>1</sup>

The village was not exactly the *state*, though it was not without its authority of insist on conformity that ranged from nominal to rigorous. The village was an association of people who shared a metaphysical dream, and because of that were willing to abide by certain village norms that grew naturally from it. The village culture was based on an inherited and consensus view within the community as to the *telos* of the village and its culture. This does *not* seem to be the village about which President and Mrs. Clinton speak.

The point that the Clintons make is not incorrect: a child to be adequately reared, probably needs a good deal more support than that which can be provided exclusively by the nuclear family, and today the nuclear families seem to be less capable of delivering the sort of physical, intellectual, and spiritual support to children than at any time within living memory. The statistics of social pathology are not difficult to come by and most of them reflect quite directly on the failure of the nuclear family to provide the sort of consistent *integral* support that children need.

One reason that the village was as effective as it was is that it provided an *integral* environment for the acculturation of children and youth. Everything meshed, at least when it was working. The religious, moral, and ethical belief systems were *integral*. This integration also often indicated the sort of clothes that would be worn without censure, the way that language was used, the behavior at the morning meal, and how to conduct oneself at a funeral and at a family gathering. There was no effort to bring this alignment about because it naturally flowed from the metaphysical assumptions of the community. The village was in many ways *organic*.

This was based on the same arguments forwarded by Orestes Brownson, the great antagonist of Horace Mann, who opposed the establishment of state school boards in the 1850s because he saw them as potentially threatening to impose a uniform state-sanctioned morality through the common school rather than allowing the school to represent the particularities of various community cultures.<sup>2</sup> James Coleman attributes the success of Catholic parochial schools to the shared purpose of everyone connected with the educational endeavor—not to facilities, teacher competence or preparation, or to levels of funding. On the basis of each of these measures Catholic schools should almost uniformly be perceived as less effective.<sup>3</sup>

The argument usually made in favor of the school "village" model, is that the families no longer are meeting the responsibilities that, in a well ordered society, are within its sphere. In far too many cases this is, sadly, true. Many of the social services that various levels of government are now willing, and even eager, to provide are probably needed though through what delivery mechanism is not clear. However, to redefine the delivery of social services as the creation of a "village" is enough to make even the most dedicated postmodernist blush. The so-called *global village* is, in fact, no traditional village at all. While obviously the boundaries of communication and interaction that we have known before have been breached, a computer in every home does not recreate the characteristics of the village.

## Causes for the collapse of the village-family

In 1996 both Senator Dole and President Clinton were the great *simplifiers*. Both were aware that there were serious problems in the land, but were satisfied to address them with little more than rhetorical flourishes that had instant political appeal to their separate constituencies.

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*Emphasis on the self rather than on responsibility.*

It has been noted that the later half of the twentieth century has been marked by a new and disturbing kind of self-absorption. Some of the causes as well as the symptoms were analyzed by Christopher Lasch's interesting book *The Culture of Narcissism*.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis in society has shifted from responsibility and duty to self-fulfillment and self-actualization. A full life is given precedence over a responsible and productive one. Weaver's metaphysical dream has disappeared in the fog of self-absorption and the thrill-chase.

In Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* one morning a man awoke and found himself slowly turning into some sort of giant beetle. One morning quite recently Western Civilization woke up and found itself disintegrating into an inchoate goo; the Traditional Religion has lost its transcendent clarity and power to invigorate the culture, and our common institutions, practically down to the corner drugstore, were reinterpreted by the newly declared intellectually elite as instruments of social oppression. Nothing remains constant, all is throbbing in a chaotic and unpredictable flux.

*Western Civilization is the midst of post-traumatic stress syndrome.*

Traumatic situations can be described as *destructively rapid changes* in the environment. If we contend that culture is organic in that it acts and develops in many ways as would a sensate organism, then we must give it the collective psychological capacity to develop pathologies such a man might develop were he transformed into a loathsome beetle.

To avoid such pathological cultural deformations is why Russel Kirk listed three major barriers which he saw as necessary to maintain cultural strength: continuity, convention and custom.<sup>5</sup> President Clinton's village represents a contrasting template designed by the contemporary secular social engineer. The true village cultures that did at one time exist in urban neighborhoods and in small towns are undergoing a centrifugal breakup due to the fragmenting pressures of constant innovation and radical secularization.

### The Metaphysical Reconnection of the Village

What is needed is a restoration of the traditional village, with people of similar mind and disposition acting together as an extended family. This does not develop easily, is difficult to maintain in a modern context, and resists the quick fix of government programs and abstract social planning.

The idea that every classroom needs computer access and every home needs to be cable ready is a symptom of the very dementia which plagues the culture. To learn love a child does not need to scan the *International Amor Homepage*, but should only have to see a teacher, a parent, a priest: members of the village. Before trying to recreate the Norman Rockwell village, it is necessary to identify and combat the centrifugal forces that led it to its demise in the first place. This does not require an Amish-like purge of everything associated with the industrial and postindustrial age, but it does require a reorientation. If we really value family and village we must do some detaching. The cure is not more of the same personless government prescribed medicine that helped create the pathology in the first place. More social planning, more technology and more secularism will not recreate the village that these very contemporary templates destroyed.

We must cherish and reinvigorate regionally-specific particular cultures. The primary condemnation of these close-knit, traditional "villages" is the fact they inherently rejected the trinity of modern gods—pluralism, egalitarianism, and secularism. President Clinton's "village", the village that it takes to raise a child, is not the global village. In order for village to exist, the paradigm of the modern trinity must be discarded for that of the traditional village.

It is interesting that some of those who are now talking about the village are the very ones who support anti-natalist government programs which limit the children to populate the villages, and which have so completely altered family demographics ever since the 1950s.

### The Great Disconnect.

There is very little that the state can do to aid in the recovery of the American cultures. There are a few things that individual groups can do and the government might, if it had any real interest in doing so, help them.

To have a family, even a simple June and Ward Cleaver nuclear family, requires a Disconnect, a detachment from the artificial reality of the television, from the computer monitor, the Nintendo, the VCR and anything else which has the effect of lessening communication with other members of the traditional village. The moral anarchy and intellectual chaos of, say, *The Jerry Springer Show*, are much easier than a true village which requires that you play ball with the neighbor kid and try to get along with his grumpy father.

The post-traumatic stress of our culture has its own drug of choice: television. And like all drugs, the television is an escape from reality. The disconnect must come in the concerned homes of the traditional village and also in the public schools that are serious about community and the village.

What can be done with education? Very simply, disconnect and isolate. Our schools should become dispensers of good cultural mental health, which means that they must become centers of continuity, convention and custom. If a school is not operating within a village's traditional understanding of continuity, convention and custom: change it!

A return to the traditional center is possible in schools, even public schools. However, the day of expecting that *neighborhood* schools, considering the social fragmentation of today's urban culture, will in any significant way constitute anything approaching a common metaphysical dream is over. Society has been thoroughly fragmented by the centrifugal and narcissistic forces already mentioned. The answer lies in allowing special schools for aggregations of people who do, more or less, share a common metaphysical dream. This can be done through the mechanism of the charter school or through a magnet system, though the magnet must be based on a philosophical core rather than trendy material or behavioral accidents such as technology or the performing arts.

By encouraging the formation of these legitimate schools of choice, an archipelago of various metaphysical dreams can be created. Effort can be united with purpose and true community can be fostered. Is this an educational panacea? Of course it isn't. There are many students and parents who not only do not have a metaphysical dream but have no interest in developing one. They will probably not benefit. But those who do have a purpose and can integrate the school into their purpose and dream will be able to benefit immensely.

There will, of course, be objections to this from certain elements of the academic community and the educational establishment. In this issue of *Educational Considerations* there are several articles that deal either directly or indirectly with post-modernism, certain strains of multiculturalism and even deconstructionism. Although those authors who espouse such thinking often give mighty lip service to the notion of diversity, they are surprisingly unwilling to accept diversity but on their own terms. Although there are some favored forms of diversity, normally schools based on the formal and systematic study of the Western literary canon, for example, do not make their cut. Those modernistic or postmodernistic educational thinkers are not the champions of school choice movement. They may speak in hostile tones of cultural hegemony and exploitation, but their preferred hegemony is their own.



Is there a future for the village? There is, but let no one think that its recreation is going to be easy. It will take the slow and plodding effort to find people, families if you will, who share a metaphysical dream and then have the intellectual and political resources to propose, organize and defend it. For those who believe that the preservation of an archipelago of integral villages is desirable in this Year of our Lord 1997, (and I don't whether that would include President and Mrs. Clinton or not), the challenge is great but the battle must be joined. The professional establishment managers tend to be more interested in uniformity, efficiency and filling the needs of the corporate workforce than they do with the variable cultures that their systems serve. The outcome is uncertain, but, as usual, T.S. Eliot gave us solemn advice.

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under  
conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor  
loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our  
business.

T.S. Eliot  
"East Coker"

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