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American
Families
Are So Unhinged

By Midge Decter



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When I was invited to come here to speak to you on the subject of women and/or family values, I must confess to you that my response was, "I hate to talk about women, and family values is a crock." First of all, I abominate the word values. (As in, my values are what I happen to prefer and they are better than your values, which are what you happen to prefer. Or even believe in.) I should have thought that the late Allan Bloom had put that word to rest forever in any field outside of mathematics and chemistry. Furthermore, in my opinion there is no such subject as women; we are all in this together, men, women, and children. And I'm not too crazy about the word family either. I always want to know what people mean by that. When the conversation gets around to family, I want to ask, "What do you mean by family? Sisters and brothers not on speaking terms because of a quarrel over property? People who presume to invade your privacy merely because they have known you since you were a small and helpless child? People who will never forget that you once bit your nails or wet your bed?"

Well, of course, I don't really feel as flippant as that sounds. It is in fact not a matter of flippancy at all but rather of astonishment that we should have gotten ourselves into the kind of mess where we should be speaking of family as if its existence were something to have opinions and theories about. Families, as I believe I have said many times before in these precincts, just ARE, the way nature just is. Sometimes they are good news and sometimes, let us not forget, they are bad news, but they are not up for debate. Why, then, are we debating about the family as if its existence were somehow open to our determination? How did we ever come to this? That's the question I really want to talk to you about.

Courtship of the New. Now, by way of answer I begin with what I suspect is the real beginning, namely, the proposition that in discussions of American life there is no single word used as often and as automatically as the word "change." (And given our new Administration in Washington, we probably ain't seen nothin' yet.) We Americans seem to have a special penchant for thinking about ourselves, for measuring ourselves, for keeping a running account of our condition, for, as you might say, taking the national temperature at regular intervals. And in all this measuring and temperature-taking, the one idea that remains constant is the idea of change.

Merely from reading the daily papers over the past forty years, you would have the impression that we have been through more fundamental revolutions—revolution, of course, being another term in popular use among us—than the world had seen in the preceding thirty centuries. We are, in short, a people besotted with our courtship of the new.

Many of you in this room may be too young to remember a man named Marshall McLuhan. He was a very brilliant and original man, who like many brilliant and original men, was afflicted with the sinful temptation to be profound. He looked at us all watching television (television was

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in those days still new enough to theorize about) and claimed to see in it not a marked change in public habits of recreation—which television certainly was—but nothing less than a radical change in the very nature of human perception. Henceforth we would not only be spending, or if you will, wasting, a good deal of time in the company of this new technology, we would be nothing less than a new species of people. Need I tell you that before he vanished into social theory heaven, he was touted as the new thinker of our age?

McLuhan is perhaps an extreme example—though he is by no means the only one nor, perhaps, even the most extreme. And certainly in many seemingly milder forms we are constantly being invited—and just as constantly accepting each new invitation—to see ourselves as travelers embarked on some uncharted sea, all alone, without a compass. Just in the last thirty years, we have had the sexual revolution, the youth revolution, the pseudo-existentialists' revolution of consciousness, the revolution from producerism into consumerism, the death of nationalism, the transmogrification of the planet into spaceship earth, and, of course, most relevant to our discussion today, the death-of-the-family, or, even more recently, anything-is-a-family, revolution.

Producing New Generations. And with each of these revolutions there has come, inevitably, the birth of a new generation. American society has become a veritable miracle of procreation. It used by common calculation take thirty years to produce a new generation; we produce at least one every five years. How we do this with so low a birthrate might once have been the subject for deep scientific speculation. But the answer is really quite simple. We produce these rapidly accelerating generations not by conception and birth but by journalism. Generations are found by the press and media, you might say, full grown, under the mulberry bushes of pop social theory.

And in the end, paradoxically, the one thing that truly makes us different from our forebears is the effect on us of this willingness, nay eagerness, to accept the idea that we are changed.

And what is the effect on us that I am referring to? In plain language, it is driving us nuts. Let me give you just a few of the more colorful examples of what I mean.

In most places in this country, the automobile has become the exclusive means of getting from one place to another. People jump into their cars to go to the nearest corner. If one's battery goes dead or, say, one's carburetor needs adjustment, full-scale emergency measures must be taken. In Beverly Hills, California, I am told, if someone is seen walking in a residential neighborhood, he is immediately suspected by the police. Yet every morning and every evening, and sometimes in the middle of the night, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of people don special costumes and shoes and at serious risk to ankles, shins, and spines run miles and miles to nowhere in particular and back again.

These same people, or others indistinguishable from them, have recently discovered that some foods have more beneficial nutrient properties than others. They have taken to considering and weighing every single thing they put into their mouths. There are never fewer than two diet books on *The New York Times* best seller list (not all of them, by the way, about how to get thin or be beautiful; some tell you how to eat so you can enjoy eternal life, and some tell you how to eat so you can succeed in business). We are, moreover, routinely issued dire warnings about what will kill you: the wrong food, the wrong air, the poisoned earth, the failure of the federal government to find the cure for this, that, and the other disease, which we hear each night over the airwaves is killing one out of every ten, or seventy, or eight hundred Americans each minute of each year. You would think the government is killing us all with its neglect. And yet everywhere we look there are old people, older than we have ever known, trying to find something to do with themselves, preferably in warm climates. Still, we walk around trembling over our imminent deaths from this, that, or the other.

Here's another example. As we all know, a critical aspect of our lives nowadays is "relationship." Some people call it "communication." People go to great lengths and vast expenditures of money to learn how to relate to one another. They even study it in college. They touch, they feel, they hug, they look into one another's eyes, on cue, as instructed to do. Yet the very same people, in ever increasing numbers, are to be seen—at work, at play, and simply walking down the street—with their ears plugged up and connected to a little box in their pockets, eyes rolling heavenward, fingers snapping. People with Walkmans—and their number is by now legion—are people marching each to his own separate and solitary drummer. You cannot even reach them to say, "Excuse me, but you are standing on my foot."

Revolution and Counter-Revolution. Now, moving from the sillier to the more advanced forms of derangement, a number of years ago, a group of young, well-heeled American women—the best educated, healthiest, freest, and most benignly brought up women in the history of the world—startled everyone by announcing in no uncertain terms that they were the victims of intolerable oppression. Chief among their oppressors, they told us, were their men: their fathers, brothers, professors, lovers, husbands. It seems that these men were treating them in a manner they dubbed "macho." Macho to them meant an excess of masculine ego and brutality. Macho men, the complaint ran, were keeping women on a pedestal, treating them on the one hand like little China dolls, and on the other hand, keeping them slaves and slapping them around. On one level, the complaint was that men were claiming for themselves the exclusive right to be powerful, to be breadwinners and competitors. On another level, it was that men refused to be tender and were afraid to cry. The response of the men to this indictment—and following them, the response of all the institutions of the culture—was immediate and unmistakable: first nervous resignation, expressed mainly in a kind of embarrassed giggle, then coerced assent, and finally full capitulation. With an almost astonishing alacrity, the men set out to mend their ways. They knocked down the pedestals; they began to shrink from the competition; and they commenced as well to duck out on the breadwinning. And as an earnest of their good intentions, they also began to cry. If whining and apologizing count for crying, they cried a lot.

Now, it may or may not amaze you to learn, the chief indictment of young, educated middle-class women against men is that they are wimps. One now hears women demanding in those wonderful proving-grounds of human delicacy, the television talk-shows and the style-section features, where are the MEN? And think of it: all this wonderful revolutionary progress was accomplished in less than twenty years!

One important effect of this remarkably speedy accomplishment has been the effect on what is arguably the most widely publicized of all our recent revolutions, namely, the sexual revolution. Unlike many of the others, the sexual revolution appears to be a permanent, and permanently evolving, one. Originally, the sexual revolution meant that women were now free to have as much premarital—and in some quarters also extramarital—sexual experience as men. It meant the lifting of the terrible old double standard. It also meant that women were to have the same sexual experience as men. They could pursue as well as be pursued, and for every male climax, there had to be at least one female one. In aid of this revolution, responsibility for contraception was shifted from men to women; manuals of sexual performance proliferated; college dormitories became coeducational; the terms of parental guidance on these matters, if there were any at all, were radically altered; and, as was to be expected, the popular culture fell completely into line. But no sooner had young women, in obedience to these revolutionary aims, begun to sleep around than they declared a counter-revolution. It was called Women's Lib. Liberation for women now meant not liberation to have sex but liberation *from* sex. The original revolution, they said, so far from liberating them, had merely made them slaves to men's filthy lusts. To make matters even more confusing, the move from revolution to counterrevolution took place so rapidly that most young girls were actually taking part in both at the same time. Simultaneously

they were jumping in and out of beds and being as hostile as possible about it. The result, not uncommon to revolutions I suppose, has been open and bloody warfare between young men and young women. No wonder they are marrying late and divorcing often.

Curious Statistics. So I guess you could say at the very least that things are not exactly well with us. Consider the following two curiosities: I do not remember the precise statistics, but they are impressive: rarely does one reach college nowadays—and even more rarely does one leave college nowadays—without having some, and possibly a considerable amount of, sexual experience. Yet while this very development was taking place, the country was at the same time being virtually smothered in pornography. If, as most people believe, pornography lives on, and feeds on, and is an expression of, sexual repression, how do we put together these two developments? American children were freed to become sexually active in order that they should not have to suffer the diseases of repression that once allegedly afflicted their elders and enriched a whole generation of psychoanalysts. Yet a moment's glance at any newsstand, or at the shelves of any videotape rental shop, or at late-night cable television, would suggest that at least this disease of a persistently repressed sexuality is running ever more rampant.

Or take the even more consequential problem of birth control and abortion. At a time when contraception has become both extremely effective and simple and easily available, in a certain number of American cities abortions are each year outnumbering live births. Say what you will about abortion—that it is murder or that it is no more than every woman's natural right—even the most passionate pro-choice advocate will not maintain that abortion is the preferred method of birth control. Yet again these two developments—an ever more perfected contraception and ever more widespread abortion—have gone hand in hand. Each year the experts produce whole libraries devoted to a dissection of the way we live now. But there has not been a single effort to explain to us how it is that sexual freedom and easy contraception should come attended with so much pornography and so many abortions

I have cited these examples, perhaps from the trivial to the deeply important—and they are by no means all the examples that could be cited—to underscore my assertion that there is something haywire with us.

The truth is, we Americans do live in very different circumstances from those of most of mankind, throughout history and even today throughout the rest of the world. But we are as human beings constituted no differently. Women, to take one of my own earlier examples, do not really wish to jump in and out of a wide variety of beds and do not thrive when they do so. Women do not thrive, either, when they live at war with men. Nor do men thrive when they are forced to live at war with women.

The circumstances under which we live are not only different, they are unbelievably benign. We live longer. We are healthier. Most of us do not have to stand by helplessly as our children are being ravaged by disease and other disasters of nature. We are mobile. The whole world in all its variety and fascination is open to us.

Still, we are troubled and we are right to be so. It is not the fact of change that troubles us so but our belief in change. For in our daily affairs we have come to conduct ourselves as if we were quite free to make up our own rules and our own lives. Each of us is a kind of walking Ford Foundation research grant to study an as yet uncompleted social experiment.

That is how this issue called family got to be put on the table. A number of years ago, a White House conference on the family—a gathering of people respectable enough to be invited by their President to advise him — foundered on the conferees' inability to agree on what is a family: is it a mother and a father living together with their offspring, or two fathers or two mothers living with their offspring, or just any collectivity of people living under the same roof in a loving way

—or perhaps, for that matter, in an unloving way? The question of definition, as we know, has since then been moved out of conference, so to speak, and into the courts. So judges of all people will now decide what and who constitute a family.

The only proper response to all this, it seems to me, is, “*Are they all crazy?*” Define a family? Haven’t we all got enough trouble with the family we’ve got? Kids who are a pain in the neck? Parents who, no matter how old and accomplished you are, go on telling you to wipe your nose? Endless days and nights of worry—about money, about the future, about whether one is doing the right thing? No wonder, once you start talking about the “value of families” you go off the track. Families are not something good, like chocolate cake, families are absolutely necessary. They are necessary not to make you happy but to make you *human*. We live, to be human beings worthy of the name, in a perpetual onrushing tide of generation, taking from those who went before and giving in return to those who come after. That’s what family teaches. Without that, you could live in a crowd and you’d still be a solitary atom, facing a senseless death foreshadowed by a weightless life. Fancy trying to fit that into a political campaign! We know what the politicians mean by the term family values, especially what the Republicans mean. They mean among other things no condoms and no introduction to homosexuality and no teaching about anal sex in the schools. And had they talked straight, who knows? They might have electrified the country. But when politicians adopt an issue, you can bet the farm that it will always come disguised as something abstract and toothless. I don’t care what party you belong to or support, if you are trying to overcome any of the sorrows of our culture, you had better look elsewhere than to the politicians.

Denying Limits. Each of us indeed had better begin by looking inside his own mind. For each of the heralds of change, each of the so-called revolutions that keep getting declared on our behalf carries the subliminal message that we late-twentieth-century Americans are unlimited and infinitely malleable. The result has been—certainly in the case of my generation it has—that we no longer assume the onerous burden of trying to teach our children what life truly requires of people. We pretend to ourselves to believe that in a technologically altered world no one way to conduct oneself is necessarily better or more useful than any other. We carry on about threats to our health and well-being when we are healthier and better off than anyone because we have in truth grown sick. And the etiology of this sickness is the denial that there are any limits on us. We keep defining things—sex, family, nature itself—in keeping with our constantly altering preferences, and the result is a kind of inescapable vertigo—call it a spiritual inner-ear infection.

In the 1960s our children confronted us—and here the “us” is the educated middle class in general and us, me myself and my friends, in terrible particular. Our children confronted us, their parents, their teachers, their spiritual leaders, their political leaders, and said, We don’t want the life you offer us. It’s too boring and hard. It’s too dangerous. It’s too...grown-up. We want, as my three-year-old grandson would put it, another different one. And what did we—all of us, parents, teachers, ministers and rabbis, politicians—what did we say in reply? “Suit yourselves”“ That’s what we said.

To be sure, nowadays in universities the kids are not being told to suit themselves—at least not by their educators. Many of these teachers, as we know, were the young folk of the ’60s I was talking about, and they seem to have determined that the freedom stops with them—that their students will have to make do, intellectually and socially, with what has turned out to suit *them*. But no matter how coerced to march in lockstep, students today are also the spiritual children of change—if for no other reason than that they too are being asked to choose a position on issues as bedrock as sex and family.

People, even the freest people on earth, cannot make their own rules and cannot make up their own lives. They cannot revolutionize themselves by fiat, merely by declaring to one another that they have done so. We need to live in communities, communities of families, if you will. We need to be affirmed and supported by others. We need to give ourselves to others. We need above all to accept the boundaries of our nature. Otherwise there is no telling just how batty—batty and unhappy—we and our children and our children's children will end up being.

