

The Place of the Family in Times of Social Transition

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Today I am taking a position about the family that doesn't cry doom and despair, the prevailing popular themes regarding the family. My position is one that comes to a considerable degree out of my own life as an activist in a non-conformist minority.

I belong to a dissenting culture of families. We have seen ourselves as a community of families engaged in changing the world around us. We went through the 1950s and the 1960s and the 1970s trying to reconstruct the society around us. Here we are in the 1980s, and I guess we are still at it. Now some of us are in the grandparent generation. That tells you that I see the family as a very special kind of social instrument, and inter-family linkages as a very special way to approach social change.

Taking the long view of history for starters, there are a couple of constants about families through time. A great deal is said about the family being in some kind of unique trouble at this point in history, and perhaps disappearing. There are all those unmarrieds in our society.

Every society creates family forms

What I have discovered through my own studies of history and the demographics of past civilizations is that the percentage of unpartnered women, that is the never-married, the widows and the divorced and separated, has been pretty much the same throughout history. Roughly one-third of women were somehow maintaining households without husbands. The other two-thirds were living in a variety of familial settings, with the patterns varying from one society to another. These proportions haven't changed over time. When I moved from historical documents to the United Nations Demographic Yearbooks reporting the statistics of 1970 around the world, I found that same figure of one-third of women unpartnered. The situation of women has not changed in that respect. The other constant thing throughout history has been the invention by each society of familial forms that meet the needs of that society. Every society has been inventive about creating family forms.

One of my favourite historical periods is the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, you have the great urban migrations from rural feudal Europe into the cities as, for example, Paris. There were thousands of women coming into the cities, and the only place for single women in urban areas in the Middle Ages was in special barracks labelled "For Prostitutes Only." Migrating rural women did not want to live in the prostitutes' barracks, so they created women's communes under the protection of the church. These communes were not religious, they were not convents, but they were under the protection of the church. There were men's communes; women's communes and rural communes. Particularly after economic depression hit the countryside, there would be groups of 20, 30, 40, sometimes up to 200 people living together in groups as a *frèreche* or a *zadruga* – the names varying from eastern to western Europe. These were communal, familial living arrangements that met the need of the time. They enabled people to share tools, resources and land, to care for one another, to look after the young, to be productive and to live comfortably.

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Families and society adapt and react to each other

Each era invents the familial forms it requires. The particular family form consisting of mother, father and children, which we tend to think of as “the family” in our age, is one of those forms. There have always been single-parent households, there have always been extended-family households, and there have always been households composed of people who were not related to each other but grouped together because economic, political and social conditions made the grouping useful. In the 19th century in North America, we had all kinds of groups coming from Europe to form intentional communities and living in various kinds of communal arrangements.

The story of those societies is parallel to the more recent wave of communes that we have known in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A lot of young people came out of World War II to form communes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but we don't hear as much about them as we hear about the communes of the later 1960s and 1970s. We have experienced a variety of types of communal households in North America for several hundred years then. We are also experiencing that variety now. Rather than looking at this bewildering variety of forms as sounding the death-knell of the family, I think it is more appropriate to stand back in admiration of how people managed to create family-type arrangements when family in the traditional sense for one reason or another was not available.

The family is an instrument for imagining futures

My basic theme tonight is that the family is the adaptive mechanism in society that helps us get over the rough spaces as we move from one era to another. It provides elasticity in the social order so we can stretch and contract, make shifts in size, grouping and organizational patterns. I am also suggesting that the family is a setting in which we can create the other, the different, the alternative. It is both the adaptor and the creator of the new. The family is an instrument for imagining futures.

The concept of creating an image of an alternative future is a very important one in our time. We have to understand what kinds of future we are, in fact, creating by the work of our own imagination, including the work of literature, the work that comes out in novels and plays and newspapers and generally in the culture of our time. We are very busily constructing images of a possible future society.

Those of you in this audience who are my age, who were born in 1920 or before, grew up in a time when we were taught an image of the future that said science and technology are going to create a peaceful, free, just society where there will be no more war, no more disease and no more poverty. At the beginning of this century, there was a very powerful feeling that this kind of future was possible and that social scientists and physical scientists working together could design a society that would eliminate all social problems. We really thought that people could live together in peace and abundance. I grew up feeling this way. I still have rooted in corners of my mind the conviction that this is what science – this is what knowledge production – can do to the human race.

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The futurist movement of this century has taught us, particularly through the work of Fred Polak, the Dutch sociologist-historian (*Images of the Future*), that the images that people create of the future bring the future about. Polak's macro-historical analysis going back to Sumer and ancient Israel, the Age of Enlightenment and the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, shows that the images projected in science fiction, particularly in the last two centuries, become pictures of a possible social order generally accepted by a society. Then people start acting in ways that bring about that which they envision. In other words, the image of the future that any society creates magnetizes behaviour toward that image and brings it about.

In this century, we have been magnetized by a science and technology image of the future. We have indeed pursued laboratory science and we have pursued social planning. Sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, economists have all worked at social construction and social design, ranging all the way from socialism and Marxism to the capitalist's laissez-faire images of the benevolent invisible hand creating the good society. What has happened in our time is that these technology-based images, worked for in good faith with an enormous amount of human energy and effort, are crumbling around us.

For a time it looked as if we could build a shell of technology that would shelter human beings from war, hunger and disease. Now we find that military technology produces fantastic planetary insecurity. Many of the best minds of each of the major industrial countries today go straight into weapons' design from our schools of engineering and science and technology. That is where the best minds go, and that is what knowledge production has done – create this fantastic insecurity. The best minds in medical technology create remarkable life-support systems for the few, while the bulk of people suffer from very poor access to health opportunities. Educational technology leaves us with children doing very poorly in classrooms. Mechanization and automation increase productivity and leave people unemployed.

What I am saying is that this use of science and technology has produced a society that is in many ways destroying us. The technological shell doesn't shield us. We are terribly vulnerable; we are at risk, and we all know it.

What we are now facing is a reconstruction of images of the future. That is what's happening, and images are being reconstructed. It happens that the nature of that reconstruction is very much linked to the role of the family.

Earlier in this century, it was said that the family is not important; we don't need it. We have professionals to develop the child, professionals to take care of healing and professionals to take care of therapy and counselling. Now we are discovering that the formation of the individual human being is a most difficult and delicate task, and that, after all, it is in the micro-community of the family that that formation takes place. The technological shell doesn't form human beings.

There is a process of rediscovery in many of the current social movements and back-to-the-land movements. These movements are somehow trying to affirm holistic values. They are all one way or another recognizing that we have to get back to the actual formation of individual human beings. There is a rediscovery of the family and familial groupings.

When I talk about the family I am talking about any type of group that provides a family-type setting. I include in that category single-person households, since many single persons in a sense maintain a familial network of relationships; that too is a type of family. Anything human beings construct or nurture over time is a family. Attention to this – attention to the craftwork of human relationship – is the new emphasis in our time. The family grouping has enormous advantages for doing this crafting of persons, particularly because the family becomes an instrument for analyzing the complexity of the planet.

Families are shaped by the past and are always adapting

Don't misunderstand me when I talk about the importance of the family and the rediscovery of the micro-unit. Do not think I am talking about a retreat from planetary society and international relations back to a simple earlier time. We don't go back ever. We always go forward. What becomes possible in the family when we use it self-consciously as a vehicle for becoming citizens of the planet is that we can see it as a way to have our initial exposure to complexity.

If you stop and think about growing up in a multi-age family group where you have older people, middle-years people and children, what you have is the most complex type of human experience possible. It comes directly from one's own most intimate environment. Each person in a family grouping is older each day than they were the day before. People change ages almost daily, particularly when they are children. As we grow older, we start shrinking; when we are younger, we grow up. Either shrinking or growing, whatever it is, we are changing size and shape: we get heavier, we get lighter, we need different clothes, we have different friends, our aspirations change, our understandings change, our processing of information about the environment changes. Each person in a family, whether we are talking about a three- or five-person family or more, is in themselves a host of complex wishes, aspirations and needs.

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The fantastic thing within the family setting is that everybody negotiates those changes every blessed day. You cannot react to the others in your family as if they were yesterday's person without causing trouble. You will get called down immediately if you are treating a sibling or a parent or a child on the basis of what they didn't know yesterday, instead of on the basis of what they understand today. You cannot treat them on the basis of yesterday's understandings. They know more about the world today and they resent being treated like children, like someone who doesn't understand. We watch the transitions from a tricycle to a two-wheeler, from the two-wheeler to the family car. Those are the big transitions. Little transitions happen every day.

I am saying that in family grouping, without ever stopping to think about it, we are negotiating extraordinary changes in every person around us and changing ourselves, adapting our behaviours to others. At this moment I am making analytic statements about the process. Normally, we don't talk about it that way.

Families are teachers of complexity

Another advantage of the family as a teacher of complexity is that it provides instantaneous feedback. In the larger social system, you can do all kinds of strange things in your workplace, in the schoolroom, in the community. You may never get feedback on the mistakes you have made or the good things you've done. In the family, feedback comes quickly. "That was crummy!" Or "Gee, that was neat!" You get it very fast. We only learn to the extent that we get feedback on our behaviour. In this microcosm of the family, we get continuous feedback as to how good our judgments are and where everybody else is at in the family.

It sounds as if I'm talking about some ideal family where everybody understands everybody else, but I'm not. The mistakes, the fights, the conflicts, the struggles over who gets the family car, what allowance I have this year as compared to last year and all the accompanying hostility, is nevertheless part of a feedback system that helps us to grow up being able to assess a rapidly shifting complex environment. Most of us don't realize what it is we are learning in the family, however. We can carry that complexity with us out into the larger world and consciously make judgments about other people's shifting needs and aspirations. All the time, we are drawing on knowledge we gained in the family, but we aren't taught to acknowledge our family-based knowledge. I think we should make that acknowledgement and begin to draw on that basic learning about complexity.

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The family has an enormous advantage in its size. I am involved in several projects researching how we adapt to catastrophe, such as climate change and war-incurred disasters. Every time you try to design a larger scale system that is going to meet the individual needs of all the people in it you miss, because the more people you are trying to plan for, the more individual differences you are simply glossing over. If you look at where adaptation is occurring, whether it is flood or famine or drought or recovery from war disaster, the groups that are making the adaptations are the familial types of groupings. They are the ones that can regroup; they can redistribute roles. A family group can reorganize its way of utilizing its environment more rapidly than any other size of group. It is the ultimate adaptive group.

It is no accident that ethnic separatist movements, which I realize is a slightly touchy subject in Canada, are nevertheless occurring all around the planet. I did a count of ethnic groups around the world several years ago. When I say ethnic separatists, I don't include only political separatists, but also ethnic autonomy movements, groups that want recognition as being different from other groups in the society. I discovered that there are only a couple of countries in the world that don't have identifiable groups that are trying in some ways to separate themselves from the national society. Even my own native country Norway has Laps and Gypsies, groups that require autonomy, maintain different languages, have different customs and different ways of healing, different values about education and so on. Luxembourg is one of the two countries in the world, if I am remembering rightly, that doesn't have some kind of ethnic minority.

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Families are problem-solving units

It is significant that these groups saying, “Here I am, I want recognition,” all have traditions of using the family unit as the problem-solving unit. They all have traditions of self-help in locating the means of subsistence. They have ways of finding food in an environment where there is little food available; they know how to hunt the countryside for edible weeds and bushes; they have their own traditions of education, of healing, of mutual aid. In North America, we have native American peoples preserving and rediscovering their own survival skills, knowledge not accessible to urban Anglo-Americans. This phenomenon of the family group preserving and passing on a set of survival skills for hard times is absolutely worldwide.

Nearly every country has groups that are saying, “We have something of our own that we are going to rely on for our welfare because the central government (whatever the country) is not administering a fair system. The bureaucracies of our society are leaving us with far more than our share of unemployment, far more than our share of disease. We are going to rely on our own traditional culture, our family cultures, to help us make a better life.”

What is known as the “Celtic fringe” in the British Isles is a good example of this. Each of the groups, in Wales, Scotland and Ireland has in some way lost out in the process of modernization and development. They have lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, poorer schools, poorer health facilities and so on. They have not participated in Britain’s prosperity. In the absence of a just redistributive system, they rely on family culture, family skills.

In every country, then, family skills are crucial for societal survival. The family does more than adapt, however, it is itself an instrument of change. As society struggles with new conceptions of gender roles, it is in the family unit that actual behaviour is reshaped. While it is important to change our textbooks to present more diverse images of men and women, so that not all women have aprons in our school readers, nevertheless, the practice of the sharing of work and the sharing of parenting – the practices that change the person and reshape the person – happen in the family. Without that chance to practice new roles, political rhetoric is not going to do much for us. Rhetoric is not going to change our society very fast.

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Families live in a “200-year present”

A special feature of the family, apart from its size and its value as a social laboratory that makes it an instrument of change, is that its cross-generational structure provides a way of grasping social time and social process. One of the things that is true about us particularly in this era in history is that we have a very truncated sense of social progress. There is a sense that every important happening has taken place in the last 10 years. If it happened before 10 years ago, it’s ancient history. But a decade or two decades is too narrow a slice of time to give us an understanding of the nature of the changes that are taking place in society. The intergenerational nature of relationships in the family enables us to get hold of larger chunks of time.

I offer for your consideration a concept that I find very useful, that of the 200-year present. This is a very real “present” in the family context. To explain the concept: today is March 19; one boundary of the 200-year present is March 19, 1881. That is the day of the birth of the people who are celebrating their 100th birthday today. The other side of that 200-year present is March 19, 2081, which will be the 100th birthday of the babies born today. Now, you may not have any centenarians in your family, and you may not have any babies born in your family today. Nevertheless, within your extended family and among those close to your family, someone will have been born somewhere close to 100 years ago, and some child you know will be alive 100 years from now.

By thinking about that span of time as encompassing the living present reality of people you know and care about, that span of time becomes accessible. It becomes our time in a very profound sense. This 200-year span belongs to us: it’s our life space. It’s the space in which we should be thinking, planning and making judgments, evaluating, hoping and dreaming. This opening up of what we normally think of as our future and our past and making it a part of our present experience, makes changes more comprehensible.

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Family relationships empower people as actors in history

“You never know what to expect next,” we say. “Look at the United States’ presidential election. Look at the terrible things the women’s movement is doing. Who is going to ask for liberation next?” Yet for 100 years women, blacks, native Americans, children, the elderly and the handicapped, and immigrant groups have all been developing a growing sense of personhood and dignity. Human rights were not unwanted in this century. New social goals, new values and concepts are emerging from decades of struggling, imagining and a painful day-by-day construction of social roles. What we are doing today is just a part of that very long process. We need to see our particular actions in this decade as a part of that process. You can listen to lectures and read books about history, but the particular significance of the family as the action ground of history is that familial relationships then empower you as a person, as an actor in history, rather than a reader of history.

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An enormous expansion of personhood becomes possible by drawing on the life experience within the family. Many people don’t experience their family as history-in-the-present in this way. We don’t share across generations in the family to the extent that we could. I am talking about an instrument that is available to us for this kind of sharing, and shortly I will talk about how we can make it work that way. It doesn’t necessarily work that way, but when it does, it becomes an enormous strengthening force in a period of very rapid change.

Another thing that the family as a social group does to help us deal with change is that it takes the continuousness of gradual development and chops it into segments. The family says, “Look, Susan is a year older today. It’s her birthday. My how Susie has grown!” Or “It’s grandma’s birthday, and everyone says she is looking a bit frailer now than she did last year.” One’s birthday isn’t any different from any other day in the year for an individual. No one suddenly assumes new characteristics on that day. Yet in the family, we mark off points on a continuum of gradual change to enable us to access and deal with the changes that have taken place very slowly. A bar mitzvah, a confirmation ceremony, a coming-out party or a golden wedding anniversary are all ceremonies that enable us to stop and realize what’s been happening to someone in our family circle. In this way, we are helped to make judgments about development and change that are hard to make in the face of uninterrupted, continuous development.

Family life is organized around a series of ritual demarcations of change that gives us a handle on change processes. These ritual demarcations give us a way to measure, evaluate, stop to reflect and plan for the future. Probably most of us at one time or another have made New Year’s resolutions. We can remember resolutions we didn’t keep last year, but then we might try again next year. Isn’t New Year’s Day a great invention? It gives us a whole year to play with in terms of purposeful change and social construction. By the same token, the celebrations of Christmas, Lent, Easter and harvest become ways of marking off the year. They are times to take stock of what supplies we have on hand in the household. In an industrial society, of course, we stock up by simply going to the store. In the historic sense, however, those seasons are ways to take inventory and to know what we have, how much we need to save and at what rate to measure out our use of what we have. We may well in the future have to make more use of those institutions as “measuring out” occasions than we have in the recent past. Rituals and holidays are great social inventions that enable us to take inventory of and evaluate our possessions and our lives in the security of the family setting.

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Families play a central providing role

Another thing about the family that makes it unique for coping with rapid change is the set of practices of saving, sharing, optimizing, making the most of what is in short supply. In times of drought and catastrophe, resource optimization happens within familial units. Government planners and aid givers, responsible for macro-level resource distribution, are helpless except as family units make these micro-adaptations to scarce resources.

Considering more positive types of change, we can think of all the dissenting cultural groupings of families who have literally sought to create a different kind of society. The Mormons, for example, went out to Utah and created a type of agricultural society and familial pattern that was a very useful solution to a very difficult period of agricultural shortages and economic depression. Women from all parts of the United States who had no home of their own, no employment, no family situation flocked to Utah to join Mormon families and find a place in society. Mormon family structure was an invention that helped American society over a difficult period.

This has been true of our most dissenting cultures. The Gray Panthers, a slightly different type of invention, has promoted ways of grouping people together in order to create family settings for displaced persons, individuals who don't have a home, who don't have a means of subsistence. The Black Muslim movement in North America has been very important in just that way, using a family-based approach to create a rich community environment for individuals who in other ways were being hurt, injured, displaced and persecuted. Some family subcultures are of course pathological, as in the case of the Manson family. Our distress over such pathologies only underlines how important the well-functioning family is to all of us.

Every family is a "micro-society"

We can think of each family or each familial grouping as a micro-society choosing a life path. We have discussed, at the Vanier conference over the last two days, lifestyle options. We have talked about the fact that most people really don't have many choices in their lives. There are so many constraints, so many things one can't do, so many opportunities that are not available because of age, sex, education, economic background, whatever. Each family, in effect, given the resources and opportunities available to it, makes choices about the kind of micro-society it wants to be. At its best, that is what the family is, a culture-choosing entity. The industrial family doesn't do this on its own, however. There is no such thing as a familial group in isolation.

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Think about an evening at home, when you draw down the blind, shut the door and settle in for a quiet family evening just by yourselves. Look at the activities that are being carried on; you are on the telephone engaged in "community networking"; you are planning a meeting, writing messages or notes about meetings; or you are reading up for some kind of personal project. At least, you are reading newspapers or watching TV to see what's going on in the world, making shopping lists or deciding when family members need their next medical checkup, or maybe you are thinking about the next PTA meeting at school.

In short, a host of things go on inside the family setting that have to do with the community itself and with the quality of civic life. When you are out in the community, on the other hand, a lot of what you are doing is creating the quality of your family life. If you are at school expressing concern about the music or language program, or the way arithmetic is being taught, you are concerned about the quality of your child's life. This is part of family life. It's as a family person that you are concerned, and you are concerned not only for your own child but for other children.

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Wherever we are in the community, we are constructing our family life out there. So much of the quality of our family life depends on whether we have a neighbourhood shopping centre, whether there is a mall in the downtown area, where the bus routes go, whether we have public transportation. All of these things impinge on family life. What we do in the community we also do for our family, and what we do for our family we also do for the community. The family is an interface between the public and the private.

Strong communities strengthen families

I have been talking as if there really were this marvellous institution of the family for everyone, a familial household that is always going to be supportive, always producing people who can go out and be socially constructive in the world. You and I know that we have rising levels of violence within families. If you are going to be murdered, you are more likely to be murdered by a family member than by anyone else. Child abuse,

spouse abuse and suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, are on the increase. I sometimes think of North America as if we all lived in one huge boomtown. The boomtowns are where we expect these social pathologies, where we expect to see families falling apart. Everybody is in a boomtown in the sense that we are all living in the midst of these rising rates of violence. What on earth do I mean, then, when I talk about the family as having this capacity of listening and nurturing and preparing for social change? If people are actually beating and killing each other in families, there are serious discrepancies here.

There are two things to be said about this. One is that a family can destroy a community. That is, a family that is in real trouble can really be destructive in a community. The other is that a community in trouble can really destroy a family. It is also true, however, that a family that has the capacity for mutual nurturance and aid can really strengthen an ailing community. Equally, a community that has good outreach and good capacity to nurture at the community level can really strengthen a weak family.

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What we have is two different dynamics going on side by side in our contemporary society. We do have destructive processes, we do have communities tearing families apart and families making communities unbearable. We also have the other: we have beneficent cycles of sharing and caring.

My research in boomtowns is directed exactly at the question, under what conditions can sharing take place? When a community is suffering from rising rates of violence and crime, and the police force is continually being enlarged, when new staffs of professionals are brought in to try to open new clinics and engage in healing therapies and when newspaper headlines state weekly the ugliness of community crime and violence, what will turn all this around? Under what conditions do those communities become humane and more nurturant places for the people that live in them?

What we are finding is that, in any rapid-growth community, there are families who have a surplus capacity to nurture. They aren't just closing the doors and dropping down the blinds, they are reaching out to others. The family interface is a real one. The people who care are there at the schools, they are organizing the mothers and fathers of the neighbourhood to deal with the local violence. They are creating support systems. They set up thrift shops and find ways to distribute food to the hungry. Food turns up in kitchens of unemployed families; it just turns up - no one is identified as having brought it. In these communities when it's harvest time, there are people who can, right down to the last bean in their garden. There are hundreds of jars that get to families that need them.

Families nurture individuals and communities

This does not solve the problem of social injustice and no one should think that it does. Let me come back, however, to the point about the crafting of human beings. Society requires human beings who are able to engage in these nurturant acts for survival. They must be men and women. As long as nurturance is defined as women's work, remains women's role, society is to remain rigid and crisis-prone. Nurturance has to be a task that is jointly shared by men and women. The capacity to identify and act on the needs of others, to think about the neighbourhood, begins in early childhood. The training for nurturance, the learning, the skills, the listening, the evaluating of the response of the other comes in the family. The family isn't the only place we learn it, but it is a very important place. Extending that process into more places in the community, creating environments where other families can have their stresses lessened so that they too can begin to engage in this kind of sharing-caring is absolutely essential if the work of professionals in social design is to have any use.

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I said earlier that we have assumed that science, technology and social planning could create a utopia. What we have instead is a world that is an armed camp. We tried doing everything through science and it didn't work. Now we can't just say let's all return to our families and expect to get a utopia that way either, of course. It can't be an either/or proposition. That is why I say that we have to think of the family as half a neighbourhood institution and half a familial institution. It has open boundaries, and you can never be sure when you are in or when you are out of the family. For example, am I speaking as a grandmother tonight or as a sociologist?

We carry bits of ourselves into each of the settings in which we work. Certainly a piece of me that is speaking tonight is grandmother. As a sociologist my boomtown research involves the analysis of neighbourhood

settings, what people do in different settings, which helping behaviours have the biggest multiplier effect, do the most for other families. However, an important part of that research consists of sitting with people in their families, watching how kids play in yards and neighbourhood spaces and just trailing around after people to see what they do and where they do it. We watch them construct their environment by the way in which they use it.

Whatever is done in terms of planning and resource redistribution at the county, state and national level has to relate to these capacities, however weak or however strong they are, that are developing inside individual families. To a depressing extent we don't notice the kinds of help that people give each other, and therefore we don't build on the human capacities that are already present. We put in professionally designed human services that don't connect with the nurturance that already goes on.

An important new area of research is on men as volunteers. We have assumed that women did all the voluntary work of the community and that this is really demeaning because it's free, it doesn't get paid, it doesn't have any status, it's women's stuff. I've made a very fine discovery in polling students in my classes, that men really put in a surprising number of hours each week on volunteer work. Nobody talks about it. It's taken as part of their business activity, but it isn't. They are doing it as volunteers. Looking at what people really do, what men really do, what women really do, what children really do, is important. Another whole arena to explore is how children nurture parents and help solve family problems. We need to look at those capacities to meet human needs and celebrate them, acknowledge them, affirm them, wherever they are, and then use our skills of social design and social support system to enhance those capacities instead of assuming that families are inherently weak, in trouble and requiring professional help. Identifying human strengths is a far more effective way to bring us into a future society than simply focusing on weaknesses.

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Vulnerability and openness are key to learning

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to an adequate acknowledgement of the role of the family in society is that helping behaviour and nurturance is considered women's stuff. It's thought of as looking after babies and seeing that husbands' slippers and pipes are laid out. We have, in short, some very poor imagery about the work of nurturance. In fact, nurturance is intimately connected with the conditions under which human beings engage in any kind of learning. What nurturance does is allow a person to be open and vulnerable so that new information can be absorbed, new mental arrangements made of facts about the outside world. That is what happens in learning. If we don't have places where we can be vulnerable and open, we can't learn anything. The reason we learned so little in school is that we were scared to death of teachers and we were scared to death of tests. The family at its best is the setting for that kind of openness and learning, a social group in which we learn to accept the uses and values of vulnerability.

Society does not encourage the development and use of vulnerability and openness in men. As long as men cling to appearance of invulnerability, we are trapped in the imagery of the man on horseback, of handling all public situations by the force of personal dominance, by mastery, by crude exercises of authority and power. By accepting dominant behaviour of men as appropriate to the conduct of public affairs, we leave tenderness to the home and to women. That kind of thinking is nonsense.

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The world that lies before us is a different kind of world. If we listen to the signals coming from the men's movement, the women's movement, the children's movement, the movement for the elderly, for the handicapped, from ethnic and racial movements, every last one of them is partly about a discovery of the personhood of human beings. They are about creating the conditions for growth, for protecting vulnerability, in people who have been buffeted by society. The family is a great place in which to learn what social movements are about, and to learn the skills of both giving and receiving nurturance. Every person has to be allowed vulnerability in order for new learning to take place. Only through openness to learning will a more peaceable, less violent, more just society come about.

Our choice of metaphors shapes our vision of the future

Having used the metaphor of the man on horseback, I would say again that in going from the individual family and the understanding of the crafting of the person that takes place in the family to the crafting of planetary society, we must be very careful about our metaphors. The kind of world community and public structures we achieve in our public order will be strongly shaped by the metaphors we use. Do we really want to continue with the man on horseback, the conquest-and-mastery model of conducting public life?

An intriguing recent development in park statuary is that the new statues to honour public personalities are not of men on horseback, but of people seated on park benches where children can crawl on their knees. I consider that a very suggestive signal of a new conception of public roles. Here we have a concept of nurturance in the public sphere, a new kind of leadership role that men may dare to aspire to as well as women.

The metaphor for the planetary community, to replace the old image of men on horseback riding around the planet keeping us all in order, may be that of the family at the dinner table: the world family at the world dinner table. The family at the table is a basic human metaphor of sharing. Food is passed around. It is divided according to the needs and preferences of the people sitting at the table. Serving food to a family is a very complex process, as everyone who has done it knows. There are many different kinds of needs around the family table and they are not all met at every moment. The general mode is one of openness and of sharing, however.

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The family is a training ground for the future

The family is both a training ground and a metaphor for the kind of society we want. We can take the skills and the analytic capacities that are developed in the course of making judgments about what's needed in a growing family and in a growing neighbourhood, and carry them from sphere to sphere and level to level as we move from the local to the planetary. I do not mean to oversimplify; conflicts arise, needs and wants differ everywhere. However, the mode of caring, the attitude of nurturance, the willingness to be vulnerable is always appropriate to the human condition at all times and places.