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## *Let's Preserve Family Life*

AMONG the many problems pressing upon us in these days is one that is above all others important: preservation of our family way of life.

Here is our top-rank social institution, and it is at the same time the nearest many of us come to that "heaven upon earth" that the philosophers talk about. It is, of all our social necessities, the most necessary.

Husband, wife and children — that is the most natural grouping for welfare, comfort and stability. But people see in our present state of society a weakening of the ties that bind families together, and they fear that this constitutes a menace to the values in life which we hold dear.

There are causes which we cannot blame, and, indeed, causes which we would not wish to eliminate. All we can do is adapt ourselves to them. For example, we have attained political democracy, which is a good thing, but it has stressed equality and the individual, whereas the traditional family idea was of a director and co-operation. We now have people living in closely-packed cities, subject to all the distractions of urban life, instead of the calm, let's-stick-together groups of rural life. We have the changed status of women, due to their new-found economic independence, and there is the opportunity offered to all members of the family to go to work. In older days, the bread-winner was the guide, counsellor, support and law-giver of the household: today, everyone has an equal — or equally loud — voice in family affairs.

Look at the complications to which this state of things gives rise. How far should a husband and wife sacrifice themselves or their comfort for the sake of their children? Or for the sake of each other? These are questions which plague every one of us.

If only, say some, we could get back to primitive impulses, all would be well. Alas! it is not possible to do so. Conditions change from generation to generation, and while it would be utterly foolish to disregard the principles of the past, we must so adapt them to the environment of today as to retain all their values without

giving in to their assumptions of being eternal laws. We must, at the same time, make sure that we have something better in hand before destroying the old ideas.

### *What is the foundation?*

The family is built upon affection. All literature records the yearning of human beings for love. The greatest poems revolve around it. Our noblest writers have, at their highest moments, described the joys of fulfilled love, and have pictured for us the wretched suffering visited upon those who throw it away or lose it.

How does love show itself in the family? Not principally in actions, or in bubbling-over enthusiasms, but in the calm feeling that here is a group of people, intimate from the child's babyhood, who would feel pride in his success, sorrow at his failure, and shame at his disgrace.

### *What is stability?*

The family holds its pre-eminent place in our way of life because it is the only possible base upon which a society of responsible human beings has ever found it practicable to build for the future and maintain the values they cherish in the present.

The successful family is not one in which there is no conflict, but one in which the husband and wife use their resources of common sense and ingenuity to work out the sharing of responsibility and practise give-and-take.

It seems necessary for the peace of mind of readers who fear the worst, to stress the fact that in a world of change the family also changes. But the influence of social heritage has in the long run outweighed social innovation. Even if, for a time, society departs from past standards, the structure seems to right itself on a level which fits the new environment. That is the character of civilization, to set aside the easy-to-follow traditional pattern while developing into something better. The vital thing is to preserve those elements of civilization, culture, ideals, standards and customs which the past

has found good, and merge them with the new or changed factors which the present day believes valid.

### *Personal and social*

If the family were to be swept away, the world would become a place of regimentation, chaos and desolation. Why? Because the family fulfils at least three vital functions: it provides sustenance and trains its members in the art of surviving; it provides the earliest group association, teaching the art of social living; and it is the primary place where the values and knowledge of culture are passed from generation to generation.

That is only a small part of the service given by the family to individual members of it. There are other functions. The family is closely related to social change. Ideas must develop there before the community adopts them.

From birth to death, there is scarcely an action that can be performed by a person that is not guided and coloured by what is learned in the family. Bitterness within the family works its way out into society. The person who is frustrated in family life is likely to become the cynic of world life.

But wholesome and constructive thinking in the family will penetrate all society. The person who learns within the family to accommodate to others, to subordinate, when necessary, personal interest to the interest of the group, and to tolerate in others fads and habits he would condemn in himself: that person has learned many of the lessons necessary to becoming a good worker, a good leader and a good citizen.

### *Effect of classes*

We must pass by, in this *Letter*, the disruption brought about by the cityward trend and by inventions. These, which are of undoubted significance, were discussed in previous articles. Instead, something will be said about the effect of social classes on family stability, a phenomenon with rapidly changing and dynamic qualities.

If we divide the classes arbitrarily, we have three: the upper class, comprising the old and the new; the middle class, divided into upper and lower; and the working class. These distinctions are important, because no matter what we say about democracy and equality, they are there.

In the old upper class the principal features are: who were one's ancestors and who are one's relatives? Background is the testing point. One of the constant worries of this group is to keep its young people from marrying indiscreetly someone outside the group.

Among the new upper-class families one finds, usually, exceptional economic success, symbolized by home ownership, fine furniture, shining automobiles and stylish clothes. Alas for their hopes, the new upper-class family

can meet the means test, but not the lineage test, and so it is likely to feel frustrated and cheated. Men don't suffer so greatly in this disappointment as do women, because men are more likely to be satisfied with the actualities, as they see them, and to pay less attention to the symbols.

When the philosophers of the nineteenth century came to discuss classes they pinned their faith on the middle class. It is certain that this is the moving class. A vast area of opportunity has been opened by scientific and commercial advancement: boys and girls of today may aspire to professional, scientific and administrative positions far beyond the reach of those in similar class categories a century ago. We have expanded our educational institutions to meet the needs of our age. Our middle-class happiness goals are success in business or a profession, a university education for children, and economic security for parents.

One of the disruptive facts in family life is that so many families with an urge to climb socially have to break with their group as part of the price they pay. It is often a stiff price to pay, and inevitably it means a rupture in the family pattern. It is a cost to be reckoned by any family with climbing aspirations.

### *Individuality and the group*

Another factor to count in the changing family picture is the shift to the democratic companionship type of family from the once common "old man of the tribe" kind of family. There are different ideas today about the role of husbands and wives and of children and parents. If the husband expects that his wife will be the devoted family slave his grandmother was, or if the wife tries to impose upon children the old-world, old-time, standards of behaviour, a blow-up may be expected.

Here is a basic clash: between personal and group organization. In olden times the group was necessary to survival; today, the individual is a person, possessed of a soul and entitled to personal self-expression. How far this can go without endangering the family is the most important social question of the age.

Egotism, or self-centredness, is one of the great wreckers of family life. And yet, personal interest is one of the most desired attributes of living in a family.

The principal thing every normal person desires in marriage is a lively, personal interest of the other person in himself or herself. It must be lively. People will tolerate affronts and injuries, particularly from one well-beloved, to a far greater extent than they will accept indifference. Perhaps we might say that indifference sends more marriages on the rocks than does any other cause.

### *Economic worries*

Some persons will say that most family disruption stems from financial and economic causes, but we need

to proceed with care in making any such judgment. Nowhere is it more true than in personal relations that things are not always what they seem. The "financial tension" that is so greatly deplored may be merely the overt expression of other worries and disappointments and troubles.

Families are, of course, particularly vulnerable economically. They are economic partnerships. They spend a lot of money. The collective family budget dwarfs even municipal, provincial and federal finance. There are some who believe that all applicants for marriage licenses should be required to present certificates showing that they have completed courses of premarital financial training.

But there is a wealth of information and help available: more, probably than on many other aspects of married life.

These helps are designed for persons who are trying to make a go of family life: not for those who are striving to keep up with the Joneses on the next street. In one case we have heard of, a couple who had lived a reasonably happy life for five years on a modest budget broke up six months after a couple with a larger income moved in next door.

Economic matters are important in family life, but they do not rate top billing. Persons with unstable personalities can quarrel as readily over money matters as about anything else. Those who make sure to keep equable temperaments can adjust themselves to really trying economic problems. Let's not take the easy way out by using budget difficulty as a peg on which to hang responsibility for a break-up.

### *Approaching marriage*

The approach young people make to marriage is a big feature about success in family building. There is a Hollywood jewellery store with a sign in the window: "We Hire Out Wedding Rings." A casual approach like that will seldom pay off in stability.

Marriage is not something that is covered in a ceremony; it is not something in which success is assured if the young people have the same background, traditions and economic status. It is not guaranteed success by books, movie-made conceptions of married life, or anything else of a casual or superficial nature.

The only thing that works effectively toward successful marriage is kinship of ideas and ideals. No blind faith in romantic love will serve, though this is a hard-to-erase social fiction.

There are no short cuts toward success in marriage. Preparation for marriage involves all that pertains to emotional maturity, and it means — here is the rub — socialization of personality. These two persons have to live together for many years, and over the course of time it is basic personalities that count.

If, at the bottom of a person's reality, there is a spirit of philosophy made up of one part ideals and two parts tolerance for another person's ideals, then there is much better hope for a happy outcome of many years of living together than if the proportion is reversed.

If there is a key word in family relationships, we suggest it is "adaptability". This is why we like the work that is done in youth organizations such as the Y's. Young men and young women learn, through the give-and-take of combined efforts and joint study groups, the basic facts of social life. They learn to live together, to share interests and enthusiasms, and to cultivate a certain maturity which excludes self-seeking, self-pity and self-indulgence. It always helps, we think, if there can be, as well, a sense of humour.

Not so far distant from this thought is another: it isn't always the easy marriages that last longest or are the happiest. By "easy" we mean those where there is no financial concern, no "in-law" difficulty, and no worry about social status. If people are to live richly together they need to have some interdependence of mind and spirit. They have to find it necessary, on occasion, to look to the other partner for moral or other support.

Marriage is a combined operation, and that does away with the freedom of isolation. Interdependence doesn't mean leaning, but being able to reach out and know that the partner is there when needed, and planning together to meet a big or a little crisis, and walking hand-in-hand along both sunlit uplands and dark valleys.

### *The family council*

To bring together in a harmonious pattern the personal traits and desires of its members, and the group needs of the family, the "family council" has been devised.

The chief function of the family council is to discuss matters of common family interest, and to agree upon things to be done. It is based upon the thought that here is a group in which each member has rights, responsibilities and privileges, but which must act, in certain matters, as a body. It gathers up all relevant data about a family problem, thus providing wider knowledge and more sound judgment than would be possible if only one or two in the family made decisions. Its function socially is to safeguard the existence of the group and the rights of everyone in it; its significance as an aid to better living lies in the feeling of security the members of the family get from this unity.

### *Family ritual*

Very like the family council in its effect, though not in its formality of organization, is ritual. This is a way of acting that acquires a certain "rightness" in each family. It is not merely a code of behaviour, but extends itself to include participation in family prayer, in religious observances, in hobbies, in observing birthdays and

Christmas, and in many other ways. It is largely through family ritual that culture is developed and passed on through generations.

Mealtime provides a recurring opportunity for ritual. It is then that the family is at its greatest ease; the members are together in one place for a definite period; and there are fewer distractions than at most other times of the day.

What is the significance of all this with regard to family stability? Surely it is obvious that the family whose members express themselves in council or at the table or on some other occasion, where they are accepted for themselves and feel important as members of the family group; surely it is evident that this family has a much greater chance of surviving than any other. Such a pattern of living averts crises, and it means that there will be little occasion for scenes and strife.

### *About fellowship*

A natural extension of the family council and the ritual of family sharing is the help the church gives. It is recognized that the church has a responsibility for building the family and supporting it as an institution, and at the same time the family is the strong support of the church. The virtues of religion are the very virtues which are needed by husbands and wives in their own relations and in their relations with their children.

The thought of fellowship, which is basic in every religion, is something that should be emphasized in family life. Certainly, fullness of happy living cannot be attained without a feeling of relatedness to some treasured person or group.

The source of many anxieties is the sensation of being alone and unwanted. It is a supreme duty of the family to weave into a stable pattern the relationship of parents and children, and then to extend it through church and other social institutions into larger groups.

This fellowship has many sides. It includes the giving and receiving of encouragement and the easing of wounds received in life. But it goes farther. It means a feeling of acceptance and approval. It means being needed and approved by people who know all about us and like us in spite of it.

The need for fellowship is as deep as the need for food. There is nothing in human experience that can substitute for genuine, warm, and simple relatedness. Those who have it not are the misfits, the youths and men and women who are trying to lose their sense of deprivation in drink or in sensual pleasures. They are, as J. L. Liebman says with clear vision in his inspiring and comforting book *Peace of Mind*: "lonely children lost and naked in a world that has never woven a garment of love for them, and that has relentlessly driven them down the empty corridors of the years, desolate and alone."

### *The art of sharing*

This brings up the matter of sharing. No one who desires the good life can live buttoned-up. Living demands activity of the physical, intellectual, domestic and spiritual kind. We have an innate urge to give, to add something to life, to enrich our families and our friends. The giving need not be of material things: merely giving credit or saying a kind word is good. If we hug our impulses, denying what we should dearly love to give, then we are not only depriving our friends of something that would enrich their lives but we are rejecting for ourselves the greatest boon — the feeling of being important both now and for future time.

Sharing keeps people young. Our minds and spirits remain flexible. We suffer less nervous strain. We get a feeling of well-being.

Those who will try sharing, consciously and sincerely, have an adventure coming to them just as thrilling as the child's first toddling steps into strange, romantic and exciting enchanted land.

It is important, too, to receive graciously. When someone proffers a kindness, or a friendship, enter into the spirit of it. Realize how important it is to receive it generously. The joy of giving may be killed if the receiver takes for granted.

### *No matter how tough*

No matter how tough life in your family may seem on occasion — even if you seem to have enough troubles and crises for a television serial — there is something constructive that can be done about it. Given a thoughtful appraisal of the problems, and a sincere desire, you will get good results. One of our troubles is that we human beings do not so much adjust ourselves to solving problems as we do to having problems. We are inclined to acquiesce in them as things that must be taken for granted.

Life, as is said so boldly by S. H. Kraines in *Managing Your Mind*, is neither a rose garden nor a garbage dump; it's neither and it's both. There are arid places that can be turned into gardens, and dumps that can be removed. We, like our environment, are in process of becoming; we are capable of modification and change. A good rule is: don't accept anything you don't wish until you have used all your imagination and sincerity and graciousness to make it better.

Stable and successful family living must be earned and achieved. It will not come upon us by accident or law or custom. Education will help, the counsellor will certainly be of assistance, an article like this may show some possibilities. But the threads must be woven by the individuals who are most concerned.