

# **A Taste of the October Workshop on The Future of The Family/The Family of the Future**

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When Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 the society in which he lived and for which he wrote was in the throes of the industrial revolution. He used Ebenezer Scrooge to give us a view of the consummate narcissist, a man isolated from himself, his family, his friends and his community; a man unconcerned about the suffering people around him. In the story three spirits visit Scrooge. Two of them speak to him as they show him the realities of the past and the present. The final nocturnal visitor, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, does not speak; it shows him how things will turn out if present trends continue and points to his final end.

Such is our situation. The past and the present can speak to us; the future cannot. We can identify trends and speculate about what they may mean and to where they will lead. We might ask, as Scrooge did, “Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?”

Technological choices and choices about how to live with and among each other are ancient dilemmas for human beings; we are not exempt any more than our ancestors were. The choices we face are very complex. The tendency is to try to use scientific methods, so useful in chemistry and physics, on systems in which the variables are numerous and the ability to limit inputs impossible. For example, the evidence tells us that single-parenting, *on average*, leads to poor outcomes for children. Is it even meaningful to ask, “How do we solve this problem?” Might we learn more from studying how families stay together, how individuals develop responsibility?

The nation has an interest in having healthy families; they are still the cornerstone of democracy and “essential to the sound development of U.S. children and communities.” Whatever can be done through community organizations, churches and mutual help groups to support intact families is time and money well spent. Efforts aimed at increasing the economic and social well-being of single-parent households need the support of the ... community especially those who can offer employment, mentoring, modeling. Programs for prevention and treatment of addictions need to include family... Treatment programs ... ought to involve the family and offer long-term support to recovering individuals and their families. Domestic violence is a continuing tragedy for all the family members involved---spouses or partners and children. Integrated community programs uniting the legal system, the providers of services to the abused, the providers of treatment to the abusers, and the addictions treatment specialists would offer hope to all involved. If we (say) that certain human behaviors cannot be treated or corrected, we subject the people with those behaviors to alienation from the community. The alienated do not go away just because we have rejected them.

Religious leaders, both the ordained and the lay, have an obligation to preach the Word and the word “whether convenient or inconvenient” ( *2 Timothy* 4: 2). Rampant materialism, unhealthy individualism, and unfettered narcissism need to be challenged. Acquiring all the latest technology, all the best and newest gadgets may actually weaken the family. Borgman writes,

The moral fabric of family life is typically patterned not so much by practices as by acquisitions, by material decisions... rather than by practical decisions. Of course, parents do not make their fundamental decisions in a vacuum.

Parents face such fundamental choices regarding careers, material well-being, the intrusion of technology into the family. Can they set limits, say “no,” say “enough”? To participate in church and community programs requires the capacity to set limits with the job, to be able to turn off the cell phone, the pager.

If, as Strauss and Howe suggest, the “fourth turning,” a “crisis,” is imminent, those individuals and families who will survive and thrive in the twenty-first century, will be those joined in communities which promote, sustain, and link the strengths of each person and each family to other individuals and families.