

The Tie Between **VIOLENCE AND VALUES**

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For nearly 40 years, America's collective consciousness has been riveted on international affairs. Distracted by threats of communist takeover and hot spots in the Middle East, we failed to recognize the growth of an insidious internal threat. I'm talking about the subtle moral decline in our families and communities the effects of which has now become the greatest threat to our national security. I believe this decline has lead to the wave of violence we see today across our country.

To see how this decline evolved, let's look back in time to our grandparents' era and before. This was when materialism and personal prosperity were scarce in this country, but the family unit was strong. The practice of virtue, selfless dedication and morality was seen as the cornerstone of American motivation and tradition. Willing to make sacrifices for the good of the family and the community, we believed a positive attitude and hard work were the ingredients for success.

We were proud of our birthright as a caring nation, able to overcome any adversity, for virtue is the foundation for inner strength. To be called patriotic was a high compliment. Our political institutions were mostly vital and responsive.

It was this faith and internal fortitude among our families and communities that enabled Americans to cope with the hardship of the Depression and the tragedy of World War II. Bolstered by a strong family unit where marriages and friendships were lifelong, we were secure in our morality and looked to an ever brighter future. Our family goal was to give our children a better life than we had. The question is, in retrospect, what did we mean by a "better life?" A common expression of the time was "We don't want our children to go through what we had to bear." But lacking material possessions, we enjoyed what we had: a close family life, simple pleasures, community spirit and strong sense of morality.

Have you heard the old saying, “Be careful what you wish for; You might just get it.”? Well, in the Fifties and Sixties, our zeal for hard work, combined with the pinnacle of the industrial age, made our wishes for riches come true. We rolled up our sleeves and worked 12 hours a day if we had to. Our motives were pure: to make America economically strong and to give our family what we had been deprived of, a house with a lawn, a new car, a college education.

But in achieving our material goals, we lost something in the process. Judeo-Christian traditions teach moderation in the face of self-indulgence. But we were not moderate; we wanted more and more.

The Bible states that you cannot serve both God and mammon, mammon being Latin for “riches”. A reader of the Bible is commanded to love the first and despise the latter. The fruits of this religious tenant were charity, internal fortitude, and happiness, whereas those of mammon were greed, selfishness and decay.

What forces caused us to begin overvaluing mammon and forget morality and God? I believe that there were three forces: economic, sociological and psychological. Acting in tandem, these forces have worked to strain the tie between virtue and family unity.

Let’s examine these three forces in detail.

1. ECONOMIC CAUSES

With the industrial and technological revolution, America’s economic structure was forever changed.

The cost of industrialization and technological advances involves enhanced material success without consideration for the human factor. We must build it bigger, faster, stronger. Success is measured not in terms of wisdom gained or virtue lived, but in money earned and power acquired, and of the latter, we can never have enough.

This outlook came into direct conflict with the principle of moderation. It forced an ethics change as our agricultural and small trades-based economy gave way to the large corporate structure of today.

Among the personal attributes required by an individual for success in corporate life is total dedication to the company's bottom line. This is often at the expense of meaningful time with the individual's family. The successful corporate executive has been depicted as a person of little conscience who would do anything for the sake of advancement.

Within this scenario, morality and forgiveness are seen as signs of weakness. Self-seeking endeavors are rewarded. You have seen this philosophy glorified in movies. It's the piece of the plot when the old man of virtue is summarily fired after years of service because he "stood in the way of progress." What does this old man represent to you?"

Gradually these materialistic ideals gained influence outside the corporate boardroom and began to erode our concepts of democracy.

The great philosophers Aristotle and Plato taught that both an enlightened and virtuous citizenry are absolutely required for the success of democracy. Enlightenment is necessary to understand the complex problems and issues facing government. Virtue is needed to guide us in our exercise of our civic responsibilities and in our selection of leaders so that we might elect those who would resolve problems to the benefit of all the people, not just seek personal gain.

With the success of industrialization, we still had an enlightened citizenry. Education was a requirement for corporate success, but morality stood in its way. Thus we became lacking as a moral citizenry as we were no longer educated about morals nor interested in our civic responsibilities. We began viewing our elected representatives in a different light. We measured candidates not on the basis of their morality, wisdom or virtue, but on how successfully they were able to influence corporate America. Because of rising media costs, soon only the rich and the powerful had a chance to win elections.

With passing years our economy continued to grow, but the quality of our work force began to deteriorate. Lacking in selfless dedication exhibited by our parents, workers demanded ever larger salaries for fewer hours and a lessening quality product. Pride of workmanship withered as working became simply a means to gain greater material comforts.

We have justified all in the name of economic progress and profits. Yet ironically, this rush for wealth and economic superiority may be the cause of its own demise. The growth rate of our economy is now at its slowest in over 30 years.

In our malaise, we knew something was wrong, but we couldn't identify the problems. We turned to self-seeking governmental leaders for help, but the spending excesses of the Eighties no longer worked. Without a sense of moderation and a recognition of the importance of values, we cannot change. We will continue to poison our air and deface our planet as we degenerate into an alienated, crime-motivated and unconnected society.

I wonder about credibility when I hear business leaders, who measure everything in terms of money, say that the current recession and economic ills are the causes of violence in our society. I believe our economy has been effected by the same set of precepts that have lead to our social decay. This is what causes violence in our society.

II. SOCIOLOGICAL CAUSES

The excesses of the Industrial Revolution chipped away at our forefathers' moderate and ethical way of living. But sociological forces have also lead to the weakening of morality and the family structure within our society. Let's discuss the notions of modernism and of liberal and self-centered behavior.

Note these statistics: Twenty years ago, the divorce rate was between 30 and 40 percent. Today, three out of four marriages end in divorce, leaving a high proportion of single-parent families. Since 1970, the number of out-of-wedlock births has tripled. This is the highest rate in the "developed" world. Last year alone, well over 400,000 high school

girls aborted unwanted pregnancies.

The large number of troubled children existing in our country is partially attributable to sociological changes which stress the right of the individual as an excuse for unrestrained, undisciplined self indulgence.

For children to gain the ethics and virtue required for happiness as an adult, I believe they must be the recipient of positive and loving influences from a pair of parents that is - male and female. According to current understanding of child development, he or she must receive certain essential psychological building blocks during the early growth years. Those at the base of the pyramid are the most important because they support later-developing blocks which are required for positive functioning and moral development.

But when the family unit is fractured by divorce or an out-of-wedlock birth, a child is hampered or even prevented from receiving these basic building blocks. Emphasis on the individual's needs rather than the family or society's needs has resulted in self-centered hedonism that has lead to the high degree of substance abuse and violence now plaguing our country.

Let me quote from an article entitled "Whose Values", published in June 1992 issue of "Newsweek" magazine. In it Joe Klein wrote, "Child and family dysfunction has risen to such dimensions sociologically that there has been an explosion of child abuse, divorce, crime especially involving violence, substance abuse, learning disabilities and welfare dependence."

Aiding in the demise of the family has been the onslaught of unchecked personal freedom now allowed the individual in our society. The presence of values tends to limit excessive self-indulgence. But given new-found personal freedom, the valueless person can only experience "greater hungers and lonelier nights." (Joe Klein - "Whose Values").

Our youth has been given the freedom to act out every passion without the limits that a moral education provides. Yet morality is rarely taught at home or in our schools.

Next from a sociological standpoint, let us consider the effect of the gradual secularization of our society since 1950. By secularization, I mean the gradual elimination of God, religion and Judeo-Christian values and traditions from our way of life.

How did this start? First, our population growth exploded. We weren't prepared. Secondly, strong materialist forces were fostered by the rise of industrialization. Finally, the teaching of values and morals was eliminated from our classrooms.

America's teachers were once influential in pointing out moral and ethical lessons as a part of their job, mirroring many of the same themes found on such popular television shows as "Father Knows Best." I believe it is no coincidence that moral lessons ceased to be a matter for the classroom when our High Court ordered the abandonment of school prayer.

In the late 1960's, the Supreme Court denounced prayer in school as a violation of the "ante establishment clause" now incorrectly described as the "Separation of church and state." Our founding fathers had intended this concept to prevent the state from establishing and preferring any particular religion, as was the case in the U.K. with the Church of England. Yet, the Court misinterpreted this to mean that the State must separate itself from religion and morality entirely. When school prayer was discarded in America's schools, the courts were instrumental in throwing out all religious, moral and ethical instruction.

Interestingly enough, the plaintiffs in the Supreme Court case were atheists with utterly no religious affiliation to protect and therefore had no legal standing to object to any religion being preferred. But that issue aside, the effect of that decision has been

devastating.

With no formal moral instruction now offered in school or at home, the only other institution left to assist us in these valuable lessons was our churches. But in the meantime, the trend toward secularism and subjectism has diminished church attendance. How often have you heard someone say, “I want to keep my religious practices personal”, as an excuse for having no involvement with organized religion?

With the exception of Sunday School or C.C.D. classes where attendance is mandated, church training of children is now almost non-existent. And so our children grow up receiving little training in morality and virtuous living. Soon they are overwhelmed by the strong influences of materialism, self-indulgence and self-seeking behavior. The resulting secularization of our society has put the American family in jeopardy.

After society’s abandonment of school prayer, parent groups influenced school committees to abandon school dress codes, create open campuses and liberalize educational techniques and subject matter. The age of individuality and personal achievement replaced team spirit. Individual expression replaced reading, writing and arithmetic.

In public school during the late 50’s and early 60’s, individuality was fostered as a positive attitude. You were told not to succumb to the party line or be limited by family and traditions; all of which were discarded. You must be free and imaginative in your thinking. “Your parents don’t know it all.” The family continued to be assaulted.

I have lived long enough now to see “individuality” evolve into an excuse for unrestrained and undisciplined personal freedom without the corresponding responsibilities. Unhampered by rules and lacking the ethics to work for the good of the whole, a self centered person guided by this philosophy risks being lead to hedonistic and material excesses which in turn creates a lifestyle of substance abuse, personality and sexual dysfunction ultimately leading to violence and criminal behavior. You can find these excesses glorified on television and the movies. Current plots revolve around over-indulgence, sexual promiscuity, crime, violence, substance abuse and

immorality. Just compare the difference between these two movies: “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” made in 1941, and “The Distinguished Gentleman” made in 1992.

Popular music and dance has followed suit. During the 40’s and 50’s, the major musical theme was love, harmonious living and togetherness. When you danced, it was a couple, touching each other. Today, my ears hear the clamor of music without meaning or harmony, espousing themes of drug abuse, suicide, sex and directionless lifestyles. Couples don’t dance together; they gyrate as individuals.

On the political front during the 60’s and 70’s, blacks struggled violently for equality while governmental bungling resulted in a foolish war in Vietnam. Civic displeasure degenerated from protests into riots. Let me quote from Joe Klein’s article in “Newsweek” again. He wrote: “Blacks needed to be freed from segregation, women needed to be freed from stereotypes. The trouble was, no one could figure out where to draw the line of liberation. It became unpopular to reject any grievance or even to make any moral judgments. The motives of criminals had to be understood rather than condemned. . . . Lifestyles were neither bad nor good; they were options.”

During the Eighties, we were given permission to “Do your own thing and you can have it all.” Inspired by the gospel of materialism, we inherited a \$4 trillion dollar national debt and a destructive self-indulgent society lacking regard for personal or civic responsibility.

Individualism became the American drug of choice. We judged our problems through materialistic eyes. Money, considered to be the only medicine able to cure our woes, was doled out like a tranquilizer to the millions on welfare. But all we created was greater dependency. We were unable to cure our problems because we misdiagnosed the disease! Further, we were required to pay more and more taxes.

Personal freedoms begat a sexual revolution. The number of single-parent families increased, but not always by choice. “All too often, one man’s sexual liberation becomes one woman’s responsibility.”

Single parenthood is difficult and not everyone is up to the special challenges it poses. Listen to these statistics: 80% of the adolescents in psychiatric hospitals come from broken or single-parent families. Approximately three out of every four teenage suicides occur in households where one parent is absent. According to writer Joe Klein, "The percentage of single-parent households with teenage children is significantly associated with the rates of violent crime and violence." In my experience, most delinquents with adult criminal records come from single families.

But two-parent families can fail as well. The parents and teachers of bygone days represented supreme authority. We learned by example and their authority limited our actions until such time as wisdom could prevail over youthful inexperience. Here again our newly found freedoms required that we discard our traditions and lessons of the past. Today's youth are for the most part undisciplined. They have been allowed personal freedom without the benefit of parental limits or positive example as their principle influence and replaced them with peer paganism. This has paved the way for self-gratification, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and irresponsible sex.

A significant segment of today's kids have no goals and no inner strength or fortitude to cope with the problems which, unfortunately, they bring upon themselves. Without the moderating quality of values they react violently to life's challenges because their personal identification was formed without moral limits.

The high divorce rate has fractured the family unit and adversely affected the children of those families. Victims without fault, they become paralyzed by the animosity and bitterness attendant with most divorces. Their stability shaken, they soon learn the art of divisiveness from their parents as a means to achieve their own desires. Mimicking their parents, they will often become violent when they cannot have their own way.

Most police departments will tell you that 50 to 60 percent of all calls for assistance involve domestic violence and abuse. Alcohol has become a prime cause of family violence and divorce. Ninety percent of batterers cited in our court were intoxicated at the time of their self centered and violent outbursts.

So, where has all this freedom of expression gotten us? Our children are witnesses to this turn of events and, if no meaningful intervention occurs, they will take their parents place in the role of perpetrator.

III PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES

As a lawyer and Clerk/Magistrate, I have become increasingly aware of the moral breakdown in our families and communities over the past two decades. My wife, Carolyn, taught high school at Weymouth South High for 19 years and would often remark about the lessening of standards and waning morality among her teenage students. This trend motivated me to attempt an analysis of the root causes of the increasing crime rate and violence that has affected our communities.

We often read about violence in the inner city and we have become hardened to its presence there. But we have withheld analysis of this same trend in our own suburban communities. Thus, the root causes of immorality and dysfunction are common to all. My experience presiding over thousands of hearings involving families or neighborhoods in conflict has lead me to this conclusion: There has been a significant breakdown in a substantial number of families in this country, particularly in our industrialized states. We now have a problem that is virtually out of control, affecting all segments of our society, all walks of life, every vital activity; indeed our basic attitudes and ideology.

Youth who grow up without cohesive, visibly caring, disciplined and attentive parents, whether rich or poor, risk becoming estranged within the family unit as well as from friends and neighbors. They lose the positive attitudes and flexibility necessary to deal with the demands of meaningful and lasting relationships. They fail to develop sufficient self-discipline and foresight to work toward long-term career goals.

With their emotional stability shaken, our troubled and dysfunctional youth have become prey to others like themselves. With self-centered attitudes, they huddle with their peers, looking for a “quick high.” Too often, drug and alcohol abuse is directly related to illicit

sexual encounters, early parenthood and crime.

My experience has shown that nine out of ten youths arrested for larceny or other violent crimes were intoxicated at the time of their arrest. Interestingly, the same nine will confess they would never think of committing a crime when sober. Alcohol clouded their ability to make sound judgments and to exercise foresight that would allow avoidance of violent acts. Most dysfunctional youth are victims themselves of substance-abusing parents.

Again, I feel strongly that this breakdown of the family and personal dysfunction among our youth is not caused by nor has any connection with economic status or class lines. I've seen troubled youth within both the very poor and the upper classes, in both inner city and suburbs. Interestingly enough, the ratio is much lower in the middle classes.

Rather, family breakdown occurs most often in those families with parents immersed in satisfying their own needs to the detriment of the child's. Violence may or may not be part of their homelife, but most often is.

Caring parents are those who emphasize fairness, charity toward others, self-sacrifice and patience. They foster successful family living by setting meaningful limits that result in responsible and disciplined children. Today's youth need positive examples, firm guidance and the opportunity to participate in family goals. Values cannot be attained until all of our basic passions one by one are systematically moderated, controlled, and vivified through the family experience.

I believe that true happiness results from responsible living. We learn how to do this through structured religious and moral education. I have said to thousands of kids at hearings, "What good is it to possess talents and abilities if you don't know how to direct them meaningfully?" Many youth misdirect their abilities in purely selfish and destructive pursuits.

Let's look at it from a theological point of view. If we accept the premise of the existence of God or a Divine Being, then the scriptures clearly demonstrate that our God cares for us. This caring is so deep, we can therefore assume our God would lay down His laws solely for the sake of our happiness and ultimate fulfillment. Trouble begins when we selfishly substitute our rules for His laws. What do we expect should result?

Those uncertain about professing the existence of God may wish to call it the natural law. Yet, all of nature, indeed the universe itself, is governed by laws so perfect and immutable that scientists are left in a continuing state of awe.

Therefore, if humanity were to conform to the biblical edicts of love and compassion, we would all become enlightened and made happy. If denied or ignored, humanity becomes alienated from the true source of love and happiness.

Training in the precepts of organized religion provides our children with the basis for a sound and moral development. By living by His rules, they learn charity, fair play and respect, all essential for making healthy and lasting relationships.

Yet, an estimated 40% or more of our children grow up today without any religious or moral training from any organized religion. With no education in human values such as charity, unselfishness, respect for others and their property, these children never achieve the happiness and fulfillment that comes from responsible living. As a consequence, they substitute artificial pleasures again often banding together with others of similar misfortune. Their gangs are drawn into alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity, turning to crime and violence to support their habits and lifestyles.

Studies have shown that the crime rate now encompasses 20 to 25 percent of our population while the AIDS epidemic gains an ever increasing foothold. Over 400,000 will die of AIDS this year alone. Society will pay as the ultimate victims of this powerful minority, and then pay again for the cost of rehabilitation.

How can family dysfunction and community disunity cause the moral decadence of an entire society? During hearings I hear of countless situations in which people come to blows over a lost parking space, being given the finger, name calling or a minor

automobile accident. I've asked why, and the excuse most frequently given is some variation of "I was up tight and lost it."

I believe the real reason is different: the aggressor's environment was devoid of values or spiritual training, which could have taught forgiveness and patience, allowing reason to prevail. These incidents of inter-personal confrontation are becoming increasingly more common as the emphasis on values lessons. Where once two boys would put on the boxing gloves to vent their frustrations, now they hunt one another down with knives and guns. Love triangles have become breeding grounds of violence as men stalk women in response to rejection.

What of the modern American husband who unwinds before coming home by stopping off to socialize with the boys? By then he's two hours late and his dinner is cold. Prompted by alcohol and unchecked by internal virtue or human values, he lashes out with violence at his wife or children.

Most batterers are self-centered, demanding, and immature people. Violence erupts in them explosively and without forethought. Persons with value training are often more responsible and therefore slower to anger.

Let me summarize. Differing attributes characterized yesteryear's generation versus today's. Yesteryear's lacked the money and resources enjoyed by today's. Instead they concentrated on family unity and values. Today's generation has let its focus drift. This has set the stage for an alienated youth and unconnected society. With greater personal freedoms and fewer limits or values to guide them, they become driven by hedonistic and self-centered tendencies. As they become desensitized by their daily exposure to violence at home, in music and at the movies, violent behavior is seen as an acceptable reaction to coping with everyday conflicts.

So, where does that leave us? I have a few suggestions on where to start.

In all relationships, whether they be in marriage, among friends or even at the workplace,

there is an attitude requirement based on love and self-sacrifice. I call it the “Ladder of Love or Disharmony.” If I reach out positively to another and perform some charitable act, I invite a similar response, which in turn motivates me to step up another rung of the ladder and repeat this process as a result, I feel good. The opposite is also true in a downward direction. If in my own self-interest I hurt another, this act invites a similarly hurtful response, and so on. The result is I feel bad. Enough said!

Although it takes greater effort and inner strength to climb upward, the laws of God, as written in our holy books urge us in that direction. By doing so we foster peace and harmony within ourselves and society as a whole. The integration of values into family living strengthens family unity, yielding happiness and positive self-image. As St. Francis wrote “Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me!”

Once fulfillment is achieved within the family structure, a similar harmony can be sought within the workplace and community.

I realize I border on a sensitive subject when I talk of the relevancy of religion. One’s spirituality is a very personal issue. Some react negatively to any open discussion of the matter, others may feel it is part of their lives best kept to themselves. But in truth, goodness is not meant to be kept inside or hidden; it must be shared. We are a sick society, yet we deny the existence of the medicine which could and would cure us! Why? Because it is not tangible. We cannot see or touch it, but it, in truth, can change our lives!

Senator William Bradley once wrote an article entitled “No Kids, No Commitments.” In it he maintained you could lose a lot in life by not taking risks or making commitments. I espouse the belief that the way to achieve true happiness is through service to others; first in the family, and then in the community. This simple concept may be old and sometimes elusive, but it is a principle held in common by all the great religions.

Perhaps this isn’t a coincidence!