

Families as Architects of a Civil Society

by Robert Glossop

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The Vanier Institute of the Family

It is within families that we are first introduced to the rules that make society work.

– Don Edgar

Civil society must be built and re-built everyday around the nation's kitchen tables. Neither individuals nor the larger society can hope to survive, much less thrive, without the many gifts and benefits that family members give each other.

The realm of civil society encompasses family, friends, neighbours, schools, churches, and workplaces. It is, according to American Senator William Bradley, "the home of an ethic different either from the self-interest of the market economy or the coercive force of government." Civil society resides neither with the individual nor the collectivity. It is neither personal nor political. Rather, the notion of civil society implies **personal** commitment to the **public good**.

There is, in Canada today, much talk of a renewed role for community in addressing the "crisis" of the contracting Welfare State. As Julie White, formerly of the Trillium Foundation, said in 1997, "Today you would be hard-pressed to read a newspaper, never mind a public policy paper, which doesn't look to communities as the answer. But to what question?" Some look to communities as the solution that will give us "a stronger local economy, primary care for its residents, jobs, resources, personal health. Others see communities as a response to the hunger for belonging and connection_or as a symbol of simpler times.

While the notion of civic renewal may be intuitively appealing, civic sentiments and virtues can hardly be taken for granted. For forty years, modern cultures have elevated the values of individual autonomy, achievement, and choice over the traditional bonds of marriage, family, children, job, community, and nation.

According to the respected American pollster Daniel Yankelovich, our recent history has been the story of a "prolonged and strenuous effort to loosen the grip of these bonds in the interest of making room for greater individual choice." He goes on to say, "So eagerly did [North] Americans embrace the ideal of making one's own choices that most constraints on personal choice were experienced as unjust and even immoral."

Before the 1950s, says Yankelovich, traditional values centered on "hard work, duty, saving for the future, social conformity, responsibility to others, the importance of sacrifice on the part of each member of the family, and respect for social taboos against having children outside of marriage and against easy divorce." But in the post-war era of affluence and choice,

The new philosophy of expressive individualism shoved these traditional values into the background. Living in the present took precedence over saving for the future. Self-fulfillment became more important than responsibility to others. Self-sacrifice was deemed unnecessary_even foolish. Many social taboos constraining individual desire fell by the wayside. Choice of lifestyle became an ethical imperative.

In the moral landscape of the modern citizen, notions such as duty, honor, honesty, temperance, sacrifice, respectability, and conformity to socially prescribed roles, have been toned down. In their place, we have tolerance for differences, personal expression, pleasure, sexual satisfaction, health, and personally meaningful work. In this new world order, self-expression displaces self-restraint, and rights are enshrined above responsibilities. In the end, the traditional civic virtues begin to sound a little quaint.

In this context of “expressive individualism,” rebuilding the foundation of civil society will take an investment of time, energy, and resources. Where to begin? Logically, with children and their families, since children are the next generation of citizens, and families the seedbeds of civic virtue. At least potentially, a family is where children learn reciprocity, trust, discipline, self-restraint, and responsibility—the virtues that make freedom and its responsible exercise possible.

The Roots of Civility

Civility means quite literally “behavior befitting a citizen.” The citizen is bound to the larger community by commitments to ends that go beyond self-interest, and by a willingness to compromise. In a civil society politics means more than the public pursuit of private interests.

Civil society depends for its existence on the capacity of families to produce able citizens, which is why the decision to become a parent is not simply a life-style choice but an ethical vocation. The family ideally introduces us to what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart”—the essential traits of character that make a democratic, sustainable, civil society possible.

Each generation of new parents takes on the duty to provide for, nurture, and teach the children who will follow in their footsteps. But for today’s parents, the winds of rapid social, economic, technological, and cultural change have obscured the path laid down by their own parents. The objectives of parents remain pretty much the same from one era to another: to patiently and lovingly provide safety and security, material well-being, and guidance. Yet the “how” of parenting has changed now that:

- adults marry later in life, bear fewer children, and wait until they’re older to become parents;
- the period of dependence is prolonged well into and beyond adolescence;
- men and women share (or, at least, are expected to share) childcare responsibilities;
- the values and aspirations of women and men have been re-defined;
- many parents no longer have extended family nearby to provide support when needed; and
- seven of every ten husband-wife families with children now count on two paycheques to make ends meet. The dual wage-earning family has emerged as the norm, both statistically and culturally, for a variety of economic, psychological, social, and cultural reasons.

Parents do their best to instill hope in their children, even though they are often uncertain

about their own futures and their children's prospects. They do their best to transmit values to their children in the context of a culture that is no longer homogeneous and that is less informed by the teachings of church, school, and extended family than in the past. Instead, our culture is influenced by television, computer games, music videos, and the Internet.

The family is where children first learn to learn. Character and identity are shaped through interaction with others. As George Herbert Mead wrote, "In the beginning is society, not the individual." In *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead shed light on the central place of family relationships in the formation of character, conscience, and identity. The child is physically and emotionally dependent on his or her "significant others," who are, ideally, both nurturing and demanding. Parents, siblings, and other kin introduce the child to a world of opportunities and expectations, and the child internalizes their attitudes, expectations, and beliefs.

Over time, this process of socialization and moral development provides the child with the foundation of an identity capable of broader commitments to others. Ultimately, this is the basis on which we build societies. Don Eberly puts it this way:

The family supplies society with socially responsible adults. It is the incubator of civilized habits and democratic skills. Social institutions play an important role in rearing children, but as most school teachers and social workers will readily admit, they are no substitute for competent, committed parents. Caring parents are uniquely qualified to ensure the psychological, moral and spiritual well-being of their children. At the risk of oversimplifying complex social problems, here is a basic rule of social health: raise children well, and most other things will take care of themselves.

The process of social learning provides children not only with the tools necessary to satisfy their needs. More importantly by far, they learn to make choices about how to satisfy their needs and how to, as Philip Selznick says, "**evaluate** their interests, **cultivate** their passions, and **choose** among options that contribute to a desirable life."

Individualism and Eroding Civic Identities

There is a new tone in public policy and political discourse that speaks again of civic virtue, character formation, and moral judgment. We are all awed when neighbours and strangers alike band together to confront a severe flood or ice storm. These extraordinary events prompt extraordinary expressions of civic will and common purpose. Yet, why should these examples strike us as so remarkable? This is an important question in so far as it is precisely this civic commitment and capacity that we would hope to harness and sustain on more than an episodic basis as we restructure the Welfare State.

According to Michael Sandel, the public philosophy of the 1950s and 60s, "held out a liberating, even exhilarating, promise: the image of persons as free and independent selves, unbound by moral or communal ties they haven't chosen." In the pursuit of this "liberating ideal," the traditional civic conception of freedom that entailed commitments to the common purposes of a larger community was displaced by a notion of market freedom. No longer did people see themselves as freely pursuing the common ends of citizens; rather, they came to see themselves as individuals pursuing their own ends.

The early theorists whose ideas inspired the institution of the marketplace and the freedoms associated with liberal individualism took for granted a broader social and cultural order in which individuals were bound together by moral sentiments and conventions rooted in tradition, culture, religion, family, and locality. As Alan Wolfe suggests, a liberal theory of politics and an individualistic theory of economics were linked to, and dependent on, a conservative theory of society.

Never before have we needed so badly to call on a strong commitment to the principles and practices of civility but, ironically, the common commitment to those principles and practices has been eroded by precisely the forces that make it more and more necessary. As Wolfe says, neither the market nor the state emphasizes “the bonds that tie people together without regard for their immediate self-interest. Neither the market nor the state was ever expected to operate without the moral ties found in civil society.”

In fact, the principles of both the state and the market when unrestrained by the normative commitments and bonds of mutual obligation taken for granted by the early theorists of liberal individualism work to undermine the sense of common purpose that many would hope to renew.

While it is fashionable these days to emphasize the extent to which the coercive powers of the state have undermined the exercise of personal and civic responsibility, the market also diminishes civic virtues and solidarity. With the now-evident failure of socialist regimes, the marketplace has won the ideological battle that occupied most of the Twentieth Century—a turn of events that has led to an unfortunate temptation to apply the principles of the marketplace to more and more spheres of life.

The right proposes market solutions to all problems and the left compulsively invokes the instruments of the state. As Jean Bethke Elshtain argues, the present irony lies in the tendency of liberal democrats to constrain the market and leave untouched by government or the larger community questions about the character of cultural life and sexual behavior. At the other extreme are conservatives who would constrain culture and sexuality while leaving the marketplace entirely unconstrained.

Alan Wolfe points out that:

When we make self-interest the guide to all our moral decisions, we are in a sense proclaiming that we no longer wish to enjoy the gift of society but wish instead to be ruled by something called human “nature,” as if society were not put in place to prevent us from acting like selfish genes. To the degree that the Chicago school of economics describes what is taking place in society, it describes a society that is in decline because its members are not willing to adhere to the rules that make it work.

Without a sense of mutual obligation, we risk becoming nothing more than a culture of resentment, mistrust, fear, and cynicism, as well as one of corrosive individualism and isolation. Allan Gregg says Canadians have “gathered into groups of like-minded citizens to advance their causes, all the while ensuring that others would not receive more than their fair share of our dwindling national resources.”

According to Daniel Yankelovich, we North Americans have purchased our individualism and expanded sense of autonomy at the expense of our families and the quality of life in

our communities. We pay for our modern freedoms with stress, debt, perpetual insecurity, and fragile personal relationships.

A Curriculum for Self-Respect and Civic Values

Those in the know have told us again and again that, if we as a nation and as individuals are to prosper in the future, it will be because we have invested in our human and social capital. Such an investment begins with today's children and with the families that we hope will foster their development.

There is today overwhelming evidence that human intelligence is multi-faceted. As important as it is for children to acquire factual knowledge and analytical skills, it is equally important that they develop their other "intelligences." As described by Howard Gardner, Daniel Goleman, and others, these are the verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, body/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Each type of intelligence makes its contribution to learning, scholastic achievement, and social adaptation. Each needs to be understood, respected and fostered if children are to develop socially and emotionally.

As Goleman convincingly argues, the difference between those of high IQ who flounder and those of modest IQ who succeed lies in their **emotional intelligence**. Resilient children who succeed against unfavourable odds such as poverty, family dysfunction, discrimination, or other risk factors are those with some hope, curiosity, purpose, self-control, confidence, and ability to relate to others.

Until recently, the emotional development of children was left largely to chance on the assumption that temperament is destiny. It is not. For example, there is now sound evidence that empathy is learned. Not surprisingly, it is within our families that we are introduced first and most lastingly to the curriculum of emotional development, for it is there that we, as Goleman describes it,

...learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings; how to think about these feelings and what choices we have in reacting; how to read and express hopes and fears. This emotional schooling operates not just through the things that parents say and do directly to children, but also in the models they offer for handling their own feelings and those that pass between husband and wife.

If there is hope that we might reduce the alarmingly high incidence of anxiety and depression among children and young people, the social and emotional problems that manifest themselves in delinquent or aggressive behaviours or in eating disorders and other self-destructive behaviors, it lies most likely in a better developed and more broadly understood curriculum of emotional development. A number of innovative school and parenting programs have already shown us the benefits of a curriculum designed to enhance "emotional literacy."

According to Goleman's summary of research in this field, what are known as social-competence programs and self-science courses have shown that children can learn to increase their emotional self-awareness, improve their ability to manage their own emotions productively, become better able to read and empathize with other people's emotions, and have better relationships.

This is a promising set of findings, to say the least. In this newly emerging body of evidence, it is possible to see:

- effective strategies with which we might begin to address many adolescent issues;
- opportunities to expand and enrich the parent support and family life programs that exist today;
- new possibilities for a genuine partnership between parents and teachers; and
- the broad contours of a curriculum toward civic development as a necessary complement to cognitive development.

We need to know more about the nature of civil society, and about the connection between civil society and families. Researchers would do well to look at the family backgrounds of people who have grown up with civic sentiments as building blocks of their characters, for example. Another fruitful avenue to explore would be families' patterns of time use and volunteering: just how much are today's families isolating themselves in their own cocoons rather than engaging in common purposes with others? We should also be looking at where and how civic learning takes place, and what resources are necessary to foster it. If we can discover how best to support families in their efforts to foster responsible citizens, the inevitable reward will be vital communities and a society that benefits us all.

Robert Glossop, Ph.D., is Executive Director of Programs and Research for the Vanier Institute of the Family.

This article was excerpted from a discussion paper entitled "Families: Architects of Social Life," which is available with full citations. Please write to rglossop@vifamily.ca.

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