

Family

by Bill Herbst

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Despite the human obsession with sex, romance, and intimate pairing, such one-to-one relationships are not humanity's fundamental social unit. That "honor" (although "designation" would be a more neutral term) goes to *family*.

Everything I know from a lifetime of education, observation, social interaction, professional work, and personal experience suggests to me that the bedrock of social organization for human beings is *family* — not one-to-one intimacy, not friendship, not business colleagues, not local community, not nationality or race. As important as all those are, no other form of human connectedness can match the sheer power of family bonds. This has been the way things were throughout the entire history of our species, from the long 200,000-year phase of hunter-gatherer-forager-herder-gardener kinship bands, through the 12 millennia of early civilization, right up to the very recent industrial/technological mass societies of the modern world. Along the way, everything else has changed — morphing, shifting, and transforming — but family has remained the same. Sacrosanct. Primal. Inviolable.

For many people, nothing is more important than family. "Blood" is not only the primary source of belonging and togetherness, but often the only form of those human longings that counts. We could put family right up there with money, since greed for wealth is usually motivated by the drive to get more for "us," and us typically means family.

Family comes in two main types: early (as the small group we're born into, called family of origin), and later (as the family we create in adulthood through marriage, child-bearing, and raising the children). That second form becomes the first for each succeeding new generation.

My favorite definition of family doesn't even have the word family in it. It's a well-known quote by American poet Robert Frost about "home" from his 1906 poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." Now, I realize that home and family are not the same. Heck, they're probably not even synonymous, but they are very closely related in our emotional imprints, inextricably tied together in our hearts and habits.

Anyway, here's the quote:

*"Home is the place where, when you have
to go there, they have to take you in."*

When I was child growing up in the burgeoning middle class of 1950s America, family was presented as the most wonderful and loving element of civilization in general and America in particular. Here's the rub, though. Family can be the greatest blessing or the worst curse in our experience, and sometimes (too often by my reckoning) it's both. So, we had two poles. On the one hand, there were Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post magazine covers depicting happy families celebrating Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas mornings in a spirit of loving togetherness, contentment, generosity, and secure belonging. On the other, there were movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* with James Dean that dramatized the darker underbelly of family dysfunction and trauma.

Overall, the positive view held sway. The negative critiques, while pungent, were marginalized, attributed by the culture to a kind of sad and rare perversity, essentially goodness gone wrong. Family was held in high esteem and lauded as an ultimate benediction, even though it wasn't for so many of us.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, however, the emerging social science of family systems ripped off that mask by revealing that the proportion of good versus bad in family was not nearly as positive as our culture wanted to believe. Cruelty and abuse turned out to be much more frequent than we had assumed. In fact, they were disturbingly common. We learned that families are very often prisons of torment and suffering. And yet, family was not dethroned from its lofty perch and remained central.

My core presumption in this brief commentary (that won't even try to plumb the depths of what family means) is that humanity has reached a stage in its evolution where the not-so-delicate imbalance between the blessings and curses of family is now a threat to our entire species. In short, I've come to believe that without a major reformation of our understanding and experience of family, we are probably doomed to a collectively dismal future.

I've written quite a bit recently about Monsters, the people in power who actively promote Death Culture and are aggressively leading humanity over a cliff. I've wondered aloud what motivates someone to become a Monster. While there is no simple answer to that question, I'm convinced that one of the major factors is family — loyalty to immediate, personal family and fuck you to everyone else. This amounts to doing anything and everything that will benefit one's family without serious concern (and sometimes no concern at all) for how others outside the family may be affected.

This is especially true of the Monsters' Minions — the many millions of people who willingly serve the Monsters and carry out their schemes. While not

Monsters themselves, these people are willing to join the Monsters' armies and perpetuate Death Culture because that allows them to feed their families. If that's not a bargain with the devil, I don't know what is.

The perverse dynamic of "anything for family" has always been at the heart of human story-telling. We see it repeated endlessly in all the entertainment arts — movies, TV shows, novels, etc. The protagonist in the story is tasked with a set of challenges to better serve humanity or to prevent harm to the collective. Complications arise when members of the hero or heroine's family are placed at risk, usually for reasons having nothing to do with the central task.

The protagonist then suffers conflicted responsibilities. Should he or she do what is best for everyone or, instead, do what will further or protect the family? Drama and suspense are built from that conflict in Act One. Throughout Act Two, the hero makes bad decisions that favor family but lies about it. Hot water and terrible predicaments ensue. Along the way, the hero rationalizes and justifies every fucked up choice. Quite often, Act Three offers a surprising resolution where the protagonist manages to achieve both — fulfilling his or her mission for society while also protecting the family. All the fucked up shit that went down in Acts One and Two is essentially whitewashed by the happy ending.

While not all stories play out that way — some highlight the moral ambiguity — happy endings remain a mainstay of fiction. Sadly, that's mostly what they are — fiction. Mere bedtime stories for children.

In real life, family is usually chosen instead of the greater good for all. What's best for society or the collective is done only if that also serves the family. If those ends are in conflict, family wins out and the good of society or humanity is sullied, tossed aside, or thrown under the bus. Of course, no one admits this. The bulk of people pose as responsible public servants, good shepherds of society and lovers of humanity, but too often they're not. First and foremost, they're loyal to themselves and their families. Everything else is a matter of convenience, or even a false façade.

Oddly enough, this doesn't bother me all that much. I accept it as the way most people are programmed to experience the Us-versus-Them dynamic — just a few of Us, and a whole lot of Them. Life is full of hard choices, some of which involve unresolvable moral conflicts.

What bothers me is that so many people are seemingly unconflicted about these difficult choices. Having made their beds, they sleep soundly at night, accepting their own justifications, convinced that they're in the right as good and sincere people. They even manage to tell themselves that they're serving the collective when they're not.

Look, I'm old enough and smart enough to understand that everyone lies. Corruption is inevitable, and I accept that. What aggravates me is the hypocrisy. I really don't like people lying to themselves and believing their own lies.

And just for the record, I'm not preaching from a place of moral superiority. I am as fallible as anyone, and more than some. I didn't choose to marry or have children for many reasons, one of which was that I didn't feel capable of handling the conflicts inherent in those responsibilities.

All the terrible problems of our age are unlikely to be solved or even ameliorated if we don't significantly change the Us-versus-Them dynamic of family against the world. That didn't matter nearly as much 100,000 years ago, nor even 1,000 years ago, but it has become critical now to the viability of our shared future.

I don't know how to achieve this transformation in our feelings, attitudes, and motivations. I fear that it's not only unrealistic, but downright impossible. It's not a question of intelligence, although we're not half as smart as we think we are. We're not a very thoughtful species, more like an extremely powerful and enraged bull in a china shop filled with delicate porcelain. We are so driven to feather our own nests that we don't stop to consider the repercussions to all the beings around us. We act as if we are separate from life, disconnected, a law unto ourselves. But we're not.

I'm not suggesting that family shouldn't be important. Quite the contrary. I think family should be a lot more important to us than it has been and is now. But our understanding of family can't remain so goddamned limited in terms of what we think it is and who we include in it. Our power has grown immense, but our love has remained small and exclusive.

In my view, we've reached a point in the long trajectory of the human species where we can no longer afford the dubious luxury of choosing family over the greater good. Do I believe that we should stop caring about our immediate families? Not at all. Instead, I'm lobbying for the idea that we should expand our membership in family to include people beyond our limited genetic heritage. In the ultimate best-case scenario, it would please me if people included in our families every living being, human and otherwise, but I acknowledge that this is not likely to occur for the great bulk of humanity.

However we can do it, though, we need more of Us and fewer of Them.