

SELF-SACRIFICE TO SELF-INTEREST

JUST HOW DID WE GET TO BE THIS SELFISH?

By Kate Fraher

“Family life just isn’t for me.”

“Having this baby on my own is just something that I have to do.”

“I feel like my marriage is holding me back from being truly happy.”

A common philosophy exists behind these statements; individual needs and desires trump those of the collective, in this case, the family. Today more women approaching the end of their child-bearing years are opting to have a child without a biological father (with a donor’s sperm) because a child is “something they’ve always wanted.” It’s not just women, either: mothers and fathers both will leave their families because of a lack of fulfillment or happiness that they believe they can find in a different mate, a new city or another family. The divorce rate reached unprecedented levels in 1987 when, according to Statistics Canada, the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce reached 50.6 per cent.¹ In 2002, one in four Canadian families with children was headed by a lone parent, which represents a 58 per cent increase from 1986.² How do we explain the mass exodus of parents from nuclear families? Social scholars are pointing to an ethos of extreme individualism as a cause of family breakdown³; they call it “expressive individualism.” Expressive individualism is the attitude that self-interest should be the main goal of any situation,⁴ asserting that individuals have a moral obligation to look after themselves first and foremost.⁵

There are a multitude of factors that have contributed to the rise of expressive individualism and the emphasis on self-service rather than self-sacrifice in the realm of the family. This article addresses three: economic prosperity, the psychological revolution and technology.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Several economic factors facilitated the introduction of expressive individualism into family life. Social scientist Daniel Yankelovich believes that economic prosperity, and/or the “affluence effect,”⁶ has triggered the inception of expressive individualism in mainstream society. Yankelovich is the founder and president of the Public Agenda Foundation, a non-profit research institute tracking public opinion in the United States. He is also the founder and chairman of the research firm DYG INC., which began monitoring shifts in social values for social and marketing research in 1986.

Yankelovich explains the affluence effect as “the reaction of people in the industrial democracies to the experience of affluence during the half-century since the end of World War II.”⁷ He argues that increased affluence has indirectly impacted people’s values by changing their perceptions of reality. He explains: “for most [people] feeling affluent means freedom and empowerment. They believe that affluence brings the power to do whatever one wants to do. This meaning of affluence has had a dramatic effect on cultural values...because of it, many traditional values, rooted in generations of want and scarcity, have been swept aside and tens of millions of people find themselves experimenting with new forms of self-expression and individuality that were unthinkable or impractical in earlier periods.”⁸ He goes on further to say, “driven by the affluence effect, the quest for

greater individual choice clashed directly with the obligations and social norms that held families and communities together in earlier years.”⁹

Once the affluence effect had taken root in mainstream culture, social scientists observed another trend that would further the expressive individualist ideal; they called it the “psychological revolution.” The term came out of a study on the emotional well-being of postwar Americans. Psychologists found that between 1957 and 1976, Americans devoted more time to studying the inner world of the self.¹⁰ The economic boom following the end of World War II meant that instead of focusing on their economic well-being (i.e. putting food on the table), people now had time to think about their emotional well-being. The study found that: “The link between economic well-being and personal happiness weakened; people were less likely to cite economic reasons as the cause of unhappiness than they had been [20] years earlier. Instead, their sense of

of their level of inner contentment, according to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author of *The Divorce Culture*. With a heightened awareness of their level of inner contentment, Whitehead argues that people “became more acutely conscious of their responsibility to attend to their own individual needs and interests.”¹³ The new thinking of the psychological revolution suggested, “At least as important as the moral obligation to look after others... was the moral obligation to look after oneself.”¹⁴ Once this had become accepted wisdom, Whitehead argues that “Americans began to change their ideas about the individual’s obligations to family and society,” beginning in the late 1950s.¹⁵ She claims that an ethical shift took place: the ethic of obligation to others shifted more toward an ethic of obligation to the self. This shift had “a profound impact on ideas about the nature and purpose of the family.”¹⁶ After this shift, the purpose of the family became more about satisfying individual needs and desires, than about satisfying the broader



individual well-being became more dependent on the richness of their emotional lives, the depth and quality of feelings, and the variety of opportunities for self-expression.”¹¹ In this way, the psychological revolution changed the conception of the successful life as “middle-class ambitions shifted from climbing the economic ladder to moving up the happiness scale.”¹²

The psychological revolution made people more mindful

needs of the group. Dr. Roy Baumeister, a Francis Eppes Professor at Florida State University, asserted that rather than seeing the self as “the servant of the marriage, today people feel that marriage should serve the self.”¹⁷

With the new ethic of obligation to the self, people became morally obligated to leave marriages that did not meet their needs. Thus, in creating this new ethic, the psychological revolution changed the conception of divorce. In her book,

The Divorce Culture, Whitehead argues that the psychological revolution did three things to change the conception of divorce. “First, it redefined divorce as an individual experience.” Americans ceased to regard it as a “legal, social and family event with far-reaching consequences for others.” Second, it “changed the locus of divorce from the outer social world to the inner world of the self.” She explains that you would never hear people talking about divorce as a “complexly faceted emotional journey” before the 1970s. She says that after the psychological revolution, divorce “became a subjective experience, governed by the individual’s needs, desires and feelings.” Third, Whitehead says that the psychological revolution changed the realm of the family – it shifted from being the place of the obligated self to a “fertile realm for exploring the potential of the self.” Divorce was an option in the realm of the family if it could assist in furthering the process of self-actualization. She states, “according to this new conception of divorce, leaving a marriage offered opportunities to build a stronger identity and to achieve a more coherent and fully realized sense of self.”¹⁸ The focus on self-actualization was detrimental to families, as social psychologist David G. Myers says: “The more people view self-actualization rather than child rearing as the purpose of partnership, the more likely they are to divorce.”¹⁹

Technology also furthered the development of expressive individualism in families. Widespread access to birth control and abortion on demand gave women more power to limit the number of children they had. This, coupled with a range of new modern appliances in the home, gave women time to pursue careers in the public square.²⁰ Women with full-time careers became economically independent from their husbands, which meant they could support themselves should they decide to get a divorce. This radical change in women’s economic status also impacted men; husbands who knew their wives could sustain themselves economically in their absence could feel less guilty about leaving them. Women’s economic independence, made possible by technology, facilitated the expressive individualist ethic by making divorce and/or separation affordable. If it was in a spouse’s best interest to leave a marriage, there was now no reason to stay and complete freedom to go.

“Sorry, but my children bore me to death!” says London journalist Helen Kirwan-Taylor. About her children, she writes: “They stopped asking me to take them to the park (how tedious) years ago. But now when I try to entertain them and say: ‘Why don’t we get out the Monopoly board?’ they simply look at me woefully and sigh: ‘Don’t bother, Mum, you’ll just get bored.’”²¹ Here is a classic example of the expressive individualist ethic: self-interest should never become subordinate to family needs. The inherent problem with this attitude, however, is as Whitehead states: “The parental role carries an obligation to sacrifice one’s own interests and defer or even limit satisfactions in pursuit of children’s well-being,

and this makes it a role that runs contrary to the expressive ethic.”²² In parenting and in marriage, self-interest and self-fulfillment seem to be overtaking self-sacrifice.

Parents who find their children boring, have children alone by choice and divorce for purposes of self-fulfillment are byproducts of a society that values self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, self-expression, unhindered freedom, choice and a moral obligation to fulfill one’s personal needs. The progression of affluence, psychology, and technology has played a role in the rise of these new values which some social scholars have labelled “expressive individualism.” Expressive individualism is not always, but is at times directly, opposed to traditional views of marriage and child-rearing, which call men and women to act sacrificially for the good of the family unit. This opposition inevitably causes friction as a nation of “expressive individualists” attempts to fit into an institution that has traditionally been dependent on selfless giving and volunteerism. Remember the story of *The Giving Tree* – Shel Silverstein’s evocative tale of a tree who loved a little boy, giving his apples, his branches and his trunk away without expecting anything in return? We read it to kids to teach the beauty of giving selflessly. It might just now be time to pull it out for disgruntled older generations, those who have learned to call selfishness “expressive individualism.”

endnotes

- 1 Statistics Canada. (2004). *Canada e-Book*. Retrieved from http://142.206.72.67/02/02d/02d_001c_e.htm
- 2 IBID.
- 3 Social Scholar Barbara Dafoe Whitehead links family breakdown to expressive individualism. See Whitehead, B.D. (1996). *The divorce culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. On the effects of expressive individualism see Bellah, R.N., ET AL. (1996). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Meyers, D.G. (2000). *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Yankelovich, D. (1998). How American individualism is evolving. *The Public Perspective*, 9(2), 3-6.
- 4 Bellah et al. (1985). As cited in Scott, J. (1997). Changing households in Britain: Do families still matter? *The Sociological Review*, 45(4), 591-620.
- 5 Whitehead, B.D. (1996). *The divorce culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- 6 Yankelovich, D. (1994). How changes in the economy are reshaping American values. As cited in Aaron, H.J. ET AL. (EDS.). 1994. *Values and public policy*. (16-51). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- 7 IBID.
- 8 IBID.
- 9 IBID.
- 10 Veerof, J., Douvan, E., & Kulka, R.A. (1981). As cited in Whitehead, B.D. (1996). *The divorce culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- 11 IBID.
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- 18 Whitehead, B.D. (1996). *The divorce culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- 19 Meyers, D.G. (2000). *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 20 Fukuyama, F. quoted in D’Souza, D. (2000). *The virtue of prosperity: Finding values in an age of techno-affluence*. New York: The Free Press.
- 21 Kirwan-Taylor, H. (2006, July 26). Sorry, but my children bore me to death! *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/femail/article.html?in_article_id=397672&in_page_id=1879
- 22 Whitehead, B.D. (1996). *The divorce culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.