

The Failure of American Community

Mark Christhilf

Mark Christhilf, a poet and critic who teaches English at Eastern Illinois University, first appeared in *Modern Age* (Summer 1979) with the publication of an essay on "W.S. Merwin: The Poet as Creative Conservator." In "The Failure of American Community" he voices deep fears that we live "in a time of nearly total breakdown of the social bond." Throughout, the evidence he gives in support of what he finds lacking in community life is substantive and convincing. Americans' obsession with having a pleasant life and worldly satisfaction leaves no room for attention to the inner life. The pursuit and the implementation of a natural morality further undermines the traditional relationship between the individual and the community. Christhilf's contention that, too often, "American politics is demagoguery—politics to please," cannot be easily rebutted when one looks at today's social, economic, and cultural scene. Christhilf writes here in the great tradition of Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* and T.S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*.

AMERICANS ENJOY an economic success which is the envy of the world's peoples. Their teenage children carry credit cards and drive new Fords at college, while the stock market in which many have investments continues its record-breaking growth. Yet material progress has not eventuated in a rational society. It has not fostered the sense of life-in-common which is the basis of national community. Instead the opposite is the case: we are living in a time of nearly total breakdown of the social bond. There is a rising tide of crime, drug abuse, divorce, and illegitimate birth. There is also a rise in mental illness, and in the number of single dwellings, a fact which by itself almost certainly suggests the atomiza-

tion of society and the failure of *communitas*.

Another sign of the deteriorating quality of social ties between Americans is a noticeable increase in litigation. A nation of comparative wealth and good fortune is today filled with victims, plaintiffs, claimants, as those who do not have what they deserve, or get the treatment they expect, bring suit not only against corporate industries but also against public institutions—schools, police departments, and city governments. The fear and suspicion pervading urban streets at dusk now lurk, although in milder form, in routine interactions between teacher and student, employer and employee, doctor and

patient. Those in official positions are afraid of providing the basis for a lawsuit through some improper word or deed that might be interpreted as a violation of another's rights. And to meet the demand for legal action by Americans against their fellow citizens, the nation's universities graduate every year ten times more lawyers than scientists.

Rarely do Americans regard such social problems as consequences of the very principles on which the Republic is founded. We are not, as a people, much given to reflection on the way that past determines present; instead we watch and wait while the government attempts timid and ineffectual reforms. Yet the intractability of such problems as crime, divorce, and excessive litigation ought to convince Americans to look for causes closer to home. For what is to blame for the failure of community is the American view of life itself, a code of conduct passed down by the founders through each generation of Americans to all those now living. Inhering both in the language and in the spirit of such documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the American code tends to fragment the community rather than to promote it. It depends on assumptions about human nature and on attitudes toward life and its pleasures which may lead to suspicion within the individual of social forms and institutions—of society itself, considered as the group which requires one's self-surrender. In fact, the American code frequently results in the alienation of the individual, and in his or her perpetual separation from the community.

Americans enter adult life expecting to please themselves. Granted the political freedom to pursue happiness, we envision a future in which worldly success brings all of the things that are supposed to satisfy—a home, a family, security, leisure. In the formation of self-concept, we use imagination to trans-

form the world in which we find ourselves into a paradisiacal world in which life unfolds pleasantly. Almost always we are at the center of the imagined life; others play a supporting part, behaving in a cooperative and rational manner. The projected course of life is also free of accident, disease, or death—free of all unpleasant obstacles to peace in life on earth.

By so dreaming Americans reconceive the dream of their forefathers. We are a middle-class, mercantile nation in which human freedom came to mean a life of enlightened self-interest, or to use the more formal term, economic individualism. One can imagine Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin looking toward the western wilderness, suspecting the enormous wealth of the pristine continent, and feeling that Providence put it all here for them and their fellow Englishmen. All seemed possible, and so they envisioned the vast spaces peopled by a rational society, in which there would be harmony even though each was free to pursue personal satisfaction. And both Jefferson and Franklin, being of scientific bent, imagined that through industry the natural world might be transformed to produce for such a society all of the appropriate comforts. Thus did the centuries in which human freedom meant freedom from the world and from earthly desire slip into the human past. In its historical context, the Declaration of Independence can be read as a justification of the desire of the Americans to profit in the new world without interference from the older society. That society was demanding an allegiance too exacting for the new spirit of commercialism. Jefferson's friend, Thomas Paine, a central spokesman for the Revolution, phrased American intentions very clearly in these words: "Our plan is commerce...."¹

In the expectation of a pleasant life and worldly satisfaction, Americans take

the first step toward self-alienation and toward failure of the social sense. One is now committed to the organization of life's energies—both physical and mental—in order to secure the material things that make up the ideal existence. Thus begins an exteriorization of identity, as one trades the days, months, and years for property and status. This effort to express identity in material terms soon leads Americans to a point of view in which status is everything: one is what one possesses, and the one who earns twice as much money as another is therefore twice the person. In this way Americans bind themselves to the world, surrendering their freedom for life at the level of desire and instinct. In fact, they succumb to an instinct now little understood because it is considered so acceptable. Termed the instinct for display of the self by Plato, it was later called the pride of life by the Church. But no matter what it is called, the instinct for display of self, like all natural desire, is fueled by the individual's capitulation. Demanding more and more of the conscious life, thus making one more and more self-centered, it may finally obliterate fellow feeling and badly obscure the conscience.

American scholars might object at this point that such an outcome was not intended by the nation's founders. Human reason was to be sovereign in a majority of citizens, helping them control their desire for pleasure, and restraining them when desires came into conflict with the needs of fellow citizens. Reason was, in this view, another term for conscience, or the social sense; and the founders did, of course, establish American democracy upon their belief in this human faculty. Every age attempts to explain human nature in a way consistent with its hopes; attempts, that is, to sort out, name, and rank the mysterious tangle of experiences that make up human life. For Enlightenment man, which

includes the founders, the standard was what is natural. Nature was deified: it was considered God, who was thought to be present in natural laws. To use the terminology of the Declaration, these were "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God"; and it would be enough to know God if human beings could learn and codify such laws. In search of a natural morality, Enlightenment man defined reason as a law of human life: it would lead to the discovery of universal norms of conduct, to an absolute standard of justice, upon which to found a just society. And all of this would come about naturally, for reason was one of life's givens. It was expected to appear and operate in the life of individuals just as inexorably as the sun appears each day.

The effect of such thinking is to produce a simplistic code of conduct: to reduce life to one level or dimension—the natural one. In all other ages, humankind has believed that human nature is dual; that man has a higher and lower being; and that the two are incompatible. Both philosophy and religion labored to show how man might resolve the painful conflict, in which to satisfy one part of oneself was to deny the other. Both also conceived human life as a difficult struggle to achieve mastery over the natural part with its desires and instincts. Then Enlightenment man says essentially that there is nothing to worry about: that the higher, reasonable self will win out automatically or naturally. But contemporary history is revealing that it is just as natural for millions upon millions of citizens to ignore the dictates of reason. In fact, there is no guarantee that human beings, even over the course of a lifetime, must become reasonable. If reason operated in us by law, we would not be free.

In order for reason to develop in the mind, one must overcome the anarchic freedom which is present in natural being, and which gives rise to a longing for

liberty from every form of social restraint. This means that one must choose perpetually against the person one is by nature: to liberate reason and to keep it vital requires a constant self-denial. A code which stresses natural being loses sight of the need for self-denial. We no longer see the satisfaction of desire and the pursuit of pleasure as threats to reason and to the higher life of the mind; after all, desire is natural. In American thought, reason becomes but the voice of moderation, perhaps controlling the desire for pleasure, but tacitly accepting it because it is part of life. Thus today any gesture of asceticism (for instance, fasting or celibacy) is regarded by Americans as worthless because it is unnatural. Indeed the nation has lost the sense in which self-denial constitutes the human being. We have lost the conception of life in which, to use a Lithuanian proverb, "Hunger increases understanding."

The development of scientific thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further crippled the American code. Americans are proud of their science and technology; they recognize that both helped to domesticate the continent and to realize mankind's age-old dream of freedom from nature—from disease, life-shortening toil, and dire poverty. But the more science progressed in its conquest of nature, the more decisively it reduced human existence to the level of natural being. In the scientific account of the origins of life, we evolve from an animal condition; life does not result from providential laws but from a chance combination of atoms. The only operative "Laws of Nature" are physical laws, especially the one which favors the most capable human beings. Science does not credit the Enlightenment belief that human reason can discover an absolute right or standard of justice upon which to establish society. From its point of view there is no higher, divine justice, no power by which human beings might

be brought to book for the conduct of life. Scientific knowledge leaves the individual staring out into the immeasurable vacuum of space, wondering how one might be anything more than an intelligent monkey. And if that were so, why deny oneself? Why not pursue pleasure?

The effect of these developments on human relationships might be already clear. More than anything else, the expectation of worldly happiness accounts for the failure of community. When happiness and pleasure are life's criteria, the other becomes a thing. Others exist to facilitate in some way the pleasant course that life is supposed to take. In this spirit, all human connections become commercialized. What one gives to others—whether at home or at work—is always given in expectation of reward. If others resist, or prove somehow an obstacle, one's conviction that life should be satisfying can make them seem an oppressor. When Americans find themselves in unpleasant associations, no matter what their previous commitment, they are more and more likely to consider withdrawal and separation. To be sure, they may try to sympathize with the other and to engage in that act of self-surrender which reason most often prompts; but increasingly they are unable. Thus there is breaking of the bonds: one moves on, looking for another associate, another spouse, or "support group." In our time most Americans believe there is no social bond—no prior commitment or pledge of allegiance to another—by which an individual ought to be bound when he or she is unhappy. But why do Americans have so little belief in the binding power of social forms?

From the beginning, American thought has counted the individual as more important than the community. Enlightenment thought is secularized Protestantism, in which the individual stands alone, responsible for his or her own destiny

beyond the authority of the social group. This means that for Americans social relationships exist by virtue of their consent. There must be willingness to be joined in life with others, and should one's union or association fail to promote one's happiness, then it loses all validity. The Declaration of Independence asserts this view of society specifically with respect to the purpose of governments. These exist to secure the people's "Safety and Happiness," and to protect their "unalienable Rights." To use more of Jefferson's language, governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." If or when a government fails to secure the happiness of the people governed, they are free to withdraw their consent, whereupon it loses all power over them, and all claim upon their allegiance. In other words, the people have a right of separation, should the social forms be found unsatisfying: "it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."

The Declaration has profoundly influenced American attitudes toward society, especially in its implied assertion that societies be organized so as to promote the individual's inalienable rights. It is the more meaningful when it is understood as an instance of Enlightenment theory about the origin and purpose of all human society. Anxious to overturn the then acceptable idea that social authority could be concentrated in a hereditary group, and eager to provide a basis for the individual's rights, Enlightenment man theorized that all society is a contract based upon consent of individuals. In a purely hypothetical account termed social contract theory, Enlightenment thinkers imagined that individuals once existed in a "state of nature" prior to choosing to live together in society. This fictive state of nature is the origin of every person's

inalienable rights, which include the pursuit of happiness, or in the British version of the social contract, the right to own property. As the theory goes, individuals living in the state of nature felt the need to protect their inalienable rights, and so consented to the contract which joined them into a society.

Such thinking about the individual and society has alarming implications, of which the first is that the human being has no *a priori* social impulse. Nor does the individual in Enlightenment theory have any innate social obligation. He or she is free not to enter social life, or make any commitment to the community. And when one consents (or contracts) to join with others in social life, it is on the basis of an expectation that the community satisfy a personal need. But such thought about society has no basis in historical fact, and tends toward an inversion of the traditional relationship between the individual and the community. It tends, that is, to free the individual from responsibility to community. In all of the evidence of societies in recorded time, the individual has always appeared as a being whose interests are subordinate to those of his or her social group—to family, clan, tribe, nation.

Whether or not Enlightenment theory accurately describes human nature, it finds expression in American government and law. The Constitution provides for a government elected by the people, of which the majority articulates its will through laws made and administered by legislative and judicial branches. But in the Bill of Rights, in the amendments to the Constitution—without which the American people would not have consented to it—there is a careful enumeration of the inalienable rights by which individuals stand beyond the power and authority of government. These inalienable freedoms include such liberties as the right to be secure on one's own land; taken as a whole, they erect around each

American a sphere of privacy which exempts him or her from all pressure of the community or its mores. The words of the first amendment express the spirit in which nearly all of them are conceived: with respect to the individual's freedom to pursue happiness, "Congress shall make no law...." The very fact that there is a Bill of Rights, and that the Constitution is amendable, indicates that in the American code the commitment to society is partial. By reserving the freedom to block or alter laws which are not conducive to a pleasant life, Americans reveal their suspicion of social authority.

The ultimate principle of social authority in American life is the reason of the people. Ideally, laws made by the majority promote the general good and the public interest: they counterbalance, or keep "within reason," the claims of individuals with their inalienable rights. But, as we have seen, the course of history has eroded the nation's confidence in the power of human reason. Few Americans believe that there are universal norms, or any sort of absolute right which reason might erect as a communal standard of behavior. More and more, individuals and their happiness provide the only criteria for what is right or just; and more and more, both the legislatures and the courts recognize the individual's consent as the basis for all social life. In consequence, American society today exists for the individual. It is an arena for the pursuit of satisfaction and of the pleasant life: one seeks out those who will consent to a mutual standard of happiness; maintains the association so long as the other meets one's expectation; and when consent fails, one exercises his or her right of separation.

As a result, more and more Americans claim inalienable rights to engage in conduct that bears no relation to traditionally moral behavior. What mores exist in America are, in large measure, a residue

of the Christian social order in which individuals have decisive obligations to society. But such mores have been virtually swept away by court-supported individual rights. In one case, a married man, whose wife cannot have children, contracts with a young woman to carry his child, paying her to give it up at birth. When the child is born, the woman changes her mind and sues for custody; but, on the basis of the contract, the court awards custody to the father. Rather than to give precedent to the age-old marriage contract (the foundation of much communal morality), and to nullify the contract between the husband and the stranger, the court upholds the second contract, allowing the man to keep the child.

More generally, in decisions concerning marriage law, there prevails the judicial attitude that if the contract does not bring about the happiness of one spouse, he or she is free to dissolve it. Thus there are many cases of Americans with two or three sets of children from two or three marital unions; and in these cases the family is little more than a brief association of half-brothers, half-sisters, or step-brothers—young lives mixed together for a few years while the parents exercise their inalienable rights. It is perhaps needless to point out that such conduct destabilizes community, because it is the family that nurtures and strengthens the individual's social sense.

Because there is so little chance of enforcing communal mores through legal means or appeals, there is a lack of consensus among Americans about what constitutes appropriate human behavior in the national community. In a society where all are free to go their own way and, as is said, "to do their own thing," there is no longer any unifying social authority or tradition. Indeed there seems to be no answer to the oft-asked question, "What is an American," for America most often seems to mean some-

thing different to each of its two hundred and sixty-five million citizens. As soon as one generalizes about the national identity, another disagrees: there is widespread relativism in which all opinions are equal. In the end, the American may be one who accepts all forms of human conduct and who consents not to bother or criticize others, as long as he or she is left alone to follow the path of inclination. Thus tolerance, once thought to be the primary virtue of democratic society, becomes vague indifference to all that others do or say. Even between family members—for instance, between parents with teenage children—harmony is often insured by indifference. No one asks any questions.

American suspicion of social authority prevents formation of a positive culture: it impedes development of a body of shared assumptions which might lead to community. In past societies, culture was transmission of a shared view of life, in which the individual had a place within the larger order of society and the whole of Creation. Culture reminded the individual of the presence of the group, thereby nourishing the growth of reason and social awareness. It also inculcated the understanding that the general good can be achieved only through the individual's self-restraint and through self-denial. By acting as a curb on desire, culture eventuated in self-cultivation. In the broadest sense, it is the entire complex of a society's institutions, which foster community by transmitting such attitudes. Education and government would be two examples of such institutions, because, in theory, they impart to individuals an awareness of the needs of the group.

However, Americans are unable—or unwilling—to fashion institutions which acculturate. Despite the revelation of scientific thought that humans are cousins to primates, and despite the dark assertions of Freudian psychology about

the destructive instincts of selfhood, we remain a romantic people. We believe with Rousseau that individuals are naturally good, and therefore without need of acculturation. In the American code, it is society that introduces evil into individuals (a view which accounts for the perennial optimism that reforms will cure social problems). Americans feel that every child begins as a *tabula rasa*, and that such negative traits as envy or greed result from life in society. A latent revolutionary spirit, dwelling within Americans, leads to a profound complacency, and prevents us from grasping that our natural selves might profit from cultivation. It also inspires resistance to attempts to modify any behavior which comes naturally. Americans listen to the prompting of the ego which tells them they are fine just as they are; and in this way many form an expectation for a life without moral improvement.

Therefore, Americans have shaped their institutions to reinforce, rather than to curb, the individual's natural tendency toward self-gratification. Our institutions only promote—however unintentionally—the economic individualism which increasingly fragments the community. American education, for example, is now in the hands of social scientists whose policies encourage students to see themselves as objects, that is, as natural beings who are produced by external social forces. From the viewpoint of these sociologists, psychologists, and educators, life ought to be pleasurable; thus from the earliest ages, children learn all about their rights to pursue worldly happiness. Later on, the expectation of a pleasant life is specifically transmitted in state-required courses in consumer education. And when, at a higher cultural level, young Americans read the national literature, they hear in it over and over that man is a noble savage—an assertion typically followed by authorial outrage that society is so wicked,

cruel, and oppressive. Two of the most frequently assigned American authors, whose novels fit this characterization, are Mark Twain and John Steinbeck.

It would perhaps be an omission to discuss American civilization without mentioning the mass media. Television, radio, and movies form an electronic culture which is culture only in the most literal sense: it is an all-pervading network of images and voices with which Americans surround themselves during many of their waking hours. Capable of reaching one in every room of the home, or in the car while on the way to work, or through headphones while taking a walk, electronic culture obstructs community by turning one's attention inward, and thus separating one from the living presence of others. Put in place around the time of the Great War, it can be thought of as a second phase of the Industrial Revolution, in which corporate interests, in order to keep the wheels of industry turning, create a demand for goods in the American. Overall, electronic culture makes one a consumer. For no matter what its value as an entertainment, and no matter what its contribution in airing discourse about public events, electronic culture is controlled by business; and this means that its overriding impulse is to incite the appetites. Making one with inward voices of desire and instinct, it tells us how to make life ever more pleasant, how to treat ourselves well, and how to get from life everything which we deserve. In the words of a not-so-recent beer commercial, "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get."

Government is another institution which merely reinforces materialistic expectations, instead of making an effort to encourage the people to govern themselves. Americans seem to want less government—unless, of course, it is providing the goods and services required for the pleasant life. Having been told for

generations that they deserve a Square Deal, a New Deal, and a Fair Deal, Americans expect their governors, at all levels, to satisfy their desires and to make life easier. Politics is the obsessive focus of American life, and in one way or another, all political discourse concerns economic justice. In the newspapers and in the electronic culture, there is an unceasing, deafening din about who gets what, about how much they got, and about whether that is fair. Under the threat of the people's demand for ever greater levels of satisfaction, no leadership can develop. Instead, American politics is demagoguery—politics to please. Eager to appear to be raising the standard of living, politicians, whether Democrats or Republicans, talk on and on about tax breaks, subsidies, and credits; but all the talk only disguises the fact that Americans have already the highest material standard of life of any nation on earth—or in human history.

The public debt is an example of the way in which the national government capitulates to expectations for a pleasant life. For nearly twenty-five years, governmental outlays have by so far exceeded income that by now the numerical figures for the debt surpass five trillions of dollars. Neither political party has been able to reverse or to reduce the debt because that would require demanding that the American people curb their appetite for goods and services. So the politicians do the easy and timid thing by debasing the national currency; that is, they inflate it at an astonishing rate in order to keep up with the debt. This takes the form of pressuring the Federal Reserve Board to allow for the printing of more and more money, ever increasing the money supply beyond what is needed for normal levels of business. In consequence, the American dollar has been so devalued that it is now near post-World War II "lows." But the average American, in

search of the next satisfaction, scarcely seems to notice.

If such trends continue, Americans may lose the opportunity to govern themselves. Even in a wealthy nation, resources are limited; thus government will not always be able to capitulate to the desires of the American people. It would have to make stricter laws to restrain them—laws to replace mores and traditions that once were based on communal awareness and learned in the family. For instance, one already sees signs on city subways, saying “Please give up your seat to the elderly.” Or one sees huge billboards on city thoroughfares, urging citizens, “Save Water.” What are these but an indication that stricter policies and laws will be developed to fill the vacuum created by the vanquished moral understanding of life?

It may be that America is already in the vanguard of an epochal shift toward a new social order. Having failed to promote communal awareness and a culture which curbs desire, Americans will exist in organized isolation. All will be at the mercy of a vast commercial engine—which is society organized solely to meet material demands and to satisfy human appetite. All will hasten to acquire a mechanical trade or skill so as to secure a position in the economic machinery of life. And each American will expand the claims of self-interest as far as he or she is able, searching restlessly on the job and in the community for a better and better deal. Limits will be imposed through the law and policy of a centralized governmental authority. This will mean the complete triumph of *Homo Economicus*, of humankind living at the physical or natural level of being. Human relations in such a society will be based on instrumentality, and will have a mechanical click.

It is questionable that anything can be done to prevent the realization of

this kind of fragmentary social order. As mentioned, Americans too often look for solutions in social reforms—when life teaches that true reform occurs only through the example that we give to others. But insofar as development of positive culture is possible for America, how might it be brought about? How might institutions initiate change so as to nourish in individuals the social sense or reason that would revitalize the national community?

Certainly both government and education could do more to encourage self-cultivation. They could do more to communicate a different attitude toward the desire for pleasure and self-gratification. Both, for instance, might foster the view that human life is challenge, labor, and development. It is perpetual effort to improve oneself through self-discipline. One of life's great choices is the decision concerning one's occupation or profession. But whether one becomes a physician or a mechanic, the goal should be to do one's chosen thing perfectly—with all of the energies of the self. This would mean growing better and more skillful at it without becoming distracted by expectation of reward, either of status or of material compensation. From the standpoint of the individual, to strive for excellence makes life more difficult; yet excellence in one's chosen occupation is intrinsically gratifying. And excellence improves the quality of human relationships within the community.

To be more specific about the role of schools in revitalizing community, America needs general educational policy which stresses self-denial. One of the great failures of American education is to lose sight of the importance of the act of concentration. This act, which is based on self-denial, is fundamental to the life of reason and to the growth of the mind. To concentrate is to sit motionless, striving silently and patiently to

free oneself from inward desire, reverie, and external distraction. Through this self-discipline, one increases the inward, mental spaces in which thought begins to make connections between one's self and the world. Concentration not only prepares the mind for the assimilation of knowledge, but also makes space for original insight, as one inwardly transforms and reconfigures the data which the world presents to the senses.

Yet there is another reason why to teach the young to concentrate is to give an enduring gift. It is in the activity in which one inwardly listens to what reason and conscience are trying to say. In the inner spaces expanded through concentration, human imagination begins its exploration: searching out all the possibilities of life, it enters the lives of others, and lives in them. It is the freedom of the inward life that all the spiritual values of *communitas* are born—compassion, forgiveness, awareness of the past, responsibility to the future.

Americans who have formed enduring relationships, unions, or associations realize that there is an intrinsic reward in the required self-surrender. Society takes its life from the daily commitment of its individual members, and this commitment involves a denial of the freedom of natural being in which there is always an urge to withhold one's self. It is one of the mysteries of the human condition that, for those who do commit themselves, society gives back a second life; one experiences a second kind of freedom, which is liberation from the confinement of the self. To say this

is merely to repeat the ancient spiritual law that it is better to give than to receive. Surely American institutions, such as the courts and the bar associations, could do more to impart this basic understanding of the rewards of life-in-common. Why not, after all, adopt the position that Americans have an obligation to society?

At this point in history Americans are "taking it easy." The nation is taking the path of least resistance—which is the way of self-gratification. Indeed American history reveals the triumph of desire over reason. It is the story of the growth of an irrational freedom that corrupts the social bonds. This is an avoidance of human destiny which, to judge from the historical record, means perpetual choice against material being and the struggle to make reason sovereign. We do not know why. We only know that there comes a call from within to break out of the confines of the self, which is bondage to desire and instinct. To respond to this call is to become fully human and to live at a higher level of being. It is to surpass the condition in which we find ourselves by laboring toward self-perfection. It may be that the call of destiny is the sum of possibilities which is God: before it, one is partial, limited, always aware of the imperfection of one's natural being. In any case, human dignity requires that we answer the call by renewing the conception of life as challenge and development—of life as a journey. To live, then, is to strive to measure up through self-cultivation, excellence in work, and reason in relations with others.

1. *Common Sense*, ed. William Van der Weyde, in *American Poetry and Prose: From the Beginnings to 1865*, ed. Norman Foerster et al., 5th ed. (Boston, 1970), 140.

Peril or Progress?

Interpreting Changes in Family Life

Bryce J. Christensen

Bryce J. Christensen directs the English Language Study Center at Southern Utah University. His first contribution to *Modern Age* (Summer 1985) was entitled "What Perishes When Literature Teachers Publish." In the following essay, which delineates and interprets changes in American family life, Christensen insists that an alarming decay is taking place. For Christensen the false culture of progress, in particular, renounces those abiding principles, and virtues, of fidelity, devotion, and selflessness which are the foundations of marriage and family life. The social vision of most progressive intellectuals today, he adds, is mainly informed by political ambitions and agenda: "The road they call progress leads not to strong family life but tends rather toward an ideologically engineered utopia." His illustrations and comments are bound to disturb readers. Clearly, neither his judgments nor his warnings can be dismissed or ignored.

FEW ASPECTS OF American culture have changed more dramatically during the past forty years ago than family life. The divorce rate (per 1000 married women) has more than doubled, while the illegitimacy rate (as a percentage of total births) has climbed more than 600 percent. Meanwhile, the marriage rate (among women ages 15 to 44) has tumbled by more than 40 percent, and the overall fertility rate has languished below replacement level since the early 1970s (a demographic reality temporarily hidden by increased longevity and immigration). During the same period, employment among married women with young children has quadrupled, putting more than 2.5 million children under the age of five in day-care centers every weekday.¹

No one disputes the trends. All agree that children, homemaking mothers, and intact marriages are rarer now than they were four decades ago, and that unmarried mothers, divorce lawyers, and childless couples are more common. But anyone who attempts to interpret or to evaluate these changes will soon find himself embroiled in a heated controversy. For though political philosophers, sociologists, and cultural commentators share the same set of social data, they disagree sharply in their interpretation of those data. Bitter and acrimonious, this disagreement brings into collision two utterly incompatible interpretations of recent family change: (1) American family life is in an alarming decay, a decay at once cause and consequence of a pro-