

Prosperity Through Timeless Values

Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse • Your Coach for the Culture Wars



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DO KIDS CELEBRATE “FAMILY DIVERSITY?”

Debating family policy is part of my job. Recently, I was the lone supporter of opposite sex marriage on a panel of people actively promoting same-sex marriage and group marriage. On another occasion, I crossed swords with Stephanie Coontz, author of several books celebrating the diversity of family forms. One of the arguments I keep hearing is the “diversity of families,” argument. It goes something like this.

We have an obligation to accept and support the many new alternative family forms. Children are being born in all kinds of families, and in all kinds of situations. Single parents, divorced and remarried parents, even grandparents are raising kids. The debate over same sex marriage includes all these people, who do not fit into the “traditional” husband and wife, raising their own kids family. We owe it to those children to try to support their families.

The problem with this argument is just this: with the possible exception of same-sex couples, I don’t think I have ever known anyone who aspired to being part of an “alternative family.”

At luck would have it, I just happened to meet a couple of people at one of the debates who had experienced “alternative family forms.” I met a student whose mother had been married and divorce four times. She didn’t agree with everything I said about marriage in general. But when I described the children of single parents and the problems

they face, she nudged her boyfriend. “That’s all true. She’s right about that.” This young woman had a difficult childhood. There was no time for soccer games, no money for ballet lessons. Her mother was preoccupied with earning a living, or with managing her love life. This young woman did not seem to be “celebrating diversity.” She hopes for something better than being in an “alternative family.” She aspires to marriage, lifelong marriage.

I met another student who was engaged to be married to a woman who had a child from a previous relationship. This man wants to be a good husband to his bride and a good father to her child. He shared with me some of the complications he and his fiancée face from the stream of relatives involved in her son’s life. Not only was the biological father still involved, but his parents were involved as well. Each of these people have their opinion about how to raise the child, and an interest in what happens to the child. We have to acknowledge that it is in some way, a legitimate interest. But for the young couple who are the custodial parents, who are trying to raise the child and build up their own relationship, these added people are added problems in their lives.

The advocates of “diverse families” sometimes sugarcoat these situations, saying that the child is lucky to have so many adults who love him and take an interest in him. And in some cases, it certainly is a blessing to have former boyfriends and their relatives involved with the child. But it would be wishful thinking to believe that this is always the case. Sometimes being involved with the relatives of a person you choose not to be married to can be a major pain in the neck. The young

man I met at the conference intends to play the hand that has been dealt him and his fiancée. But I didn't have the impression from talking to him that he was "celebrating diversity." It sounded more as if they plan to strive to create a family as close to "non-alternative" as possible.

What about grandparents raising kids? Is that something to celebrate? For most grandparents, raising their grandchildren was probably not their first choice. Most of them hoped that their children would raise their own children. Most grandparents hope to spend their golden years doting on their grandchildren, rather than having primary responsibility for raising them. When a grandparent is raising a grandchild, it almost always represents a second-best solution. Usually, the grandparents step in after their children's ability to parent has completely collapsed. Sometimes that's because of an unavoidable tragedy, such as a parent dying or becoming incapacitated. But all too often, the grandparents step in because their children's marriage has broken down, or because their children have succumbed to drug addiction, or because the children are otherwise preoccupied with themselves.

Two of the more recent child killers in the news were living with their grandparents. Christopher Pittman, the zoofighter, and the Indian school shooter, Jeff Weise. They both killed their own grandparents. In both cases, the grandparents took on these already troubled kids because there was no one else to do so. These are not cases that call for celebration. These are rather evidence of failure by the parents, and tragedy for the grandparents.

The issue isn't whether we are going to banish all children from non-married couple families to the fringes of society. The issue is what kind of child rearing environment are we going to endorse and support in society. We know that the two-parent, married couple family creates the best life chances for kids. Are we going to try to encourage and support people in having children inside marriage? Or are we going to create the conditions under

which more kids will be born outside marriage? The advocates of diverse families are offering a counsel of despair. We can't stop people from having children outside of marriage, they say, so let's help them manage the worst consequences. I realize lifelong married love is difficult, but I say it is worth the effort. I say, choose hope.

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