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In hope of a genuine age of possibility

Morna Murray | Dec. 13, 2012 NCR Today

David Brooks believes that in the last generation, we have entered what he calls an "Age of Possibility [1]." He defines this new age as younger people "becoming intolerant of any arrangement that might close off their options." He goes on to conclude, essentially, that this kind of thinking is a major factor in family breakdown around the world.

I like reading David Brooks. Not because I agree with him all the time, but because he usually makes well-reasoned arguments and makes me think. He really lost me on this one, though.

Boiling the breakdown of the family to a belief that a particular generation does not want to close off their "options" seems slightly narrow to me. Aren't there quite a few more complex reasons, most of them economical, for this very real societal problem?

Yes, as Brooks says, single parenthood has increased as an "option" since the 1960s. True enough. This was gradual, though; it did not happen overnight, and the reactions to women who choose to be single mothers are as varied as the mothers themselves, in my experience. The reasons for this change were also not limited to the women's movement or a sexual revolution. I had a friend approaching 40 who was a lawyer and unmarried. She really wanted children but did not have a reliable partner. She chose to get pregnant from a sperm donor. She had a good income, could afford great child care, and had support from her family, and yet still I worried about her because I know myself how hard single parenting is: I was a single parent for 12 years. For my friend, who wanted to be a mother, was running out of time and simply had not found a suitable husband, it was a reasonable decision. She wasn't "keeping her options open." She wanted to be a mother and she had no other options.

That said, a girl who is 16, lives in poverty, has never had the love she needed from parents or other caring adults, and decides to get pregnant without the benefit of marriage in hopes she will, in her belief, have someone to love again is not doing so to "keep her options open." This is born of a culture and society, at least in the U.S., that increasingly looks like a caste system. She's desperately looking for genuine love, not "options." Of course that is not the way to find it, but that is another discussion altogether.

It seems to me, besides being overly simplistic, Brooks has the argument backward. Consider this excerpt:

> The surest way people bind themselves is through the family. As a practical matter, the traditional family is an effective way to induce people to care about others, become active in their communities and devote themselves to the long-term future of their nation and their kind. Therefore, our laws and attitudes should be biased toward family formation and fertility, including child tax credits, generous family leave policies and the like."

So is he saying we should have policies that "enforce" family formation? I'm not sure that is possible. I certainly agree with having child tax credits and generous family leave policies, but these policies are designed to assist in the survival and the maintenance of families, not "family formation and fertility." I also think we need the

earned income tax credit, increased funding for child care, early childhood education, nutrition programs for woman and children, SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), foreclosure assistance for low-income families, effective community-based youth programs for low-income communities, mentoring, after-school activities, effective youth violence prevention, more funding for child welfare and juvenile justice system reform; the list goes on. In short, all the programs that House Republicans would like to gut.

We don't need these policies to change a younger generation's push toward "keeping options open." We need them to help low-income parents keep their families together, body and soul. We need good affordable health care (and thankfully, increasing implementation of the Affordable Care Act will provide that) so low-income parents don't have to choose between medicine for a sick child and paying the rent or putting supper on the table. There is only so much stress human beings can tolerate, and certainly that varies. But the stress of poverty breaks families down. And there is no argument that the cycle of poverty has been intractable. We've been working on it in earnest since the 1960s.

Some people have had some very good and comprehensive ideas and put them into practice, like Geoffrey Canada, who created the Harlem Children's Zone. But by and large, the pundits and policymakers who talk about poverty have little to no experience with the crushing hopelessness of being born into generations-long poverty. I certainly do not. I try my best to empathize and advocate for effective policies, but I will never truly understand what it is like to live it. When I became a single parent, having been born, by luck of the draw, into a higher "caste," I was fortunate. I had an education and profession that allowed me to be with and support my children and still earn an income. I wasn't, by the way, "choosing" single parenthood, nor was I trying to keep my options open.

In the above-cited excerpt, Brooks claims the "surest way people bind themselves is through the family ... the traditional family is an effective way to induce people to care about others ... and devote themselves to the long-term future of their nation and their kind." Their kind? That is a bit reminiscent of a certain remark concerning 47 percent of the population. It is also, at its essence, the same kind of reasoning the 16-year-old who longs for love uses when she decides to have a baby. She can "create" the love she is missing. According to Brooks, we can "create" certain mindsets in people so they are less focused on their jobs or careers and more focused on a two-parent family. Again, I do not think this will work. The underlying causes for single-parent families are far more complex and difficult to solve. It starts with realizing the people we are talking about are people, people with human dignity, not objects to be "induced." And the people who have the luxury of focusing on their professions to the exclusion of being in a two-parent family typically do not need child tax credits.

Perhaps my take on Brooks' article is over-focused on individuals living in poverty. But that is the subtle message of his article. Paid family leave is important, but it doesn't typically tear middle-class families apart. If it does, there are more serious reasons for that than being able to stay home for six paid months with a new baby.

Brooks closes his article by asserting: "The problem is not necessarily a changing family structure. It's people who go through adulthood perpetually trying to keep their options open." I disagree. The problem is people thinking the solution to family breakdown is some kind of simplistic "mindset" of a generation that has been labeled in a column the "age of possibility" and then expounded upon as if this hypothesis were true. History shows a lot more has happened in the past generation. Child poverty has increased -- it is currently 22 percent of children in America, the richest country on earth -- and minorities are overrepresented in single-family homes. Is that because people think single parenthood will keep their options open? I don't think so. Perhaps it has something to do with our tax policies, the power of special interests, the disgraceful influence of wealthy corporations in Congress -- such as oil, gas, pharmaceutical and insurance companies -- and more than a decade of warfare that has created the largest deficit this country has ever seen.

Before I start mentioning every social and economic issue we have, let me close with the underlying thread of this article. Call it the Catholic (and other religions') focus on the common good, or call it social justice, as so many young people do these days. But for many of us working on behalf of the most needy and vulnerable children and families, the only way to address issues like the breakdown of the family is to get at the source of the breakdown, not by backing into it with a few policies that are constantly fighting for funding survival in Congress. Some of the policies Brooks mentions are helpful to those fundamental problems. But his underlying premise that people are simply looking to keep their options open is absurd. It is frighteningly similar to rhetoric we heard during the welfare reform battle of the mid-1990s.

Yes, we need policies to support keeping families together. We also need to encourage young people, especially those without options, to believe there is more out there for them than having a baby before they are ready. Quality education, job training programs, high school mentoring, college tuition assistance: these are also policies that would help, and have been on the chopping block. The ACA policy on free preventive contraception will also help. A new study [2] out of St. Louis' Washington University School of Medicine, published in *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, shows abortion rates have plummeted with free contraception, reducing unplanned pregnancies and abortions by up to 78 percent over the national rate.

So I'm not so sure about the definition of this "Age of Possibility." I hope for a genuine age of possibility. One that is defined as focusing on policies to help our young people, especially those most vulnerable, to have the means to realize their full and God-given potential, so that single parenthood before they are ready is not the only option they see. It seems to me that would be truly promising. That could go a long way toward helping the younger generation realize not only what they have to offer the world, but also the value of genuine support and family, however it is defined.

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