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WHERE HAVE OUR VALUES GONE?

The fraying of America's social fabric is fast becoming a national obsession. Three out of every four Americans think we are in moral and spiritual decline. Two out of three think the country is seriously off track. Doubts about the president's character have driven his standing in the polls down about 15 points. Social dysfunction haunts the land: crime and drug abuse, the breakup of the family, the slump in academic performance, the disfigurement of public places by druggies, thugs and exhibitionists. Are we now, to use Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's phrase, "defining deviancy down," accepting as part of life what we once found repugnant?

We certainly seem to have lost the balance between societal rights and individual freedoms. There are daily confrontations with almost everyone in authority: blacks against the white power structure, women against patriarchy, feminists against feminism, gays against homophobia, children against parents, mothers against matrimony, fathers against child support, churchgoers against the church, students against universities. Instead of a culture of common good, we have a culture of constant complaint. Everyone is a victim. The have-nots claim victimization at the hands of the successful. Crime is sanctioned by the fact, real or imagined, that the criminal had an unhappy childhood. Gone are the habits America once admired: industriousness, thrift, self-discipline, commitment.

The combined effect of these sicknesses, rooted in phony doctrines of liberalism, has been to tax the nation's optimism and sap its confidence in the future. And it is the young who are strikingly vulnerable. They are being deprived -- like no previous generation -- of the emotional comfort and moral nurturing provided by the traditional family. Instant gratification is the new order of the day. Personal impulses, especially sexual, are constantly stimulated by popular music and television, with other mass media not far behind. TV and music often seem to honor everything that the true American ethic abhors -- violence, infidelity, drugs, drinking -- and to despise everything that it embraces -- religion, marriage, respect for authority. No wonder it is difficult to sustain parental values and parental continuity.

Behind the popular culture lies a capitalist system whose development now also contributes to the erosion of family and community. The individual flourishes best in small neighborly communities based on the traditions and habits of the family, the church, the township, where trust, intimacy and cooperation are prized. But the ideal of the individual in the community is constantly threatened by a market that seeks mobility of labor and capital. We extol the virtues of self-discipline, hard work, patience and personal responsibility, but market capitalism requires the citizen to be a consumer first, to buy now, pay later and enjoy himself. Altruism is not encouraged in a culture of acquisitive individualism.

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There is a great yearning in the country to provide our national life and institutions with a larger moral dimension: The success of the movie Forrest Gump lies in its appeal to the decency of Americans. Redemption has to begin with television and with education. Children spend more time before the TV set than they do at school. Society must find some way for television to have a higher purpose than making money. Consistent with our nation's commitment to freedom of the press, the president should establish a national commission to review the impact of television and suggest how it might play a more constructive role in our society. Education is an economic imperative since business requires greater skills and sophistication from its employees. But it is also a moral imperative. Everyone who could benefit should have the opportunity not just for learning skills but for learning how to find sustenance in knowledge.

The nation's hunger for a public commitment to social and moral betterment is not a simple nostalgia for the greater simplicities of yesteryear; the clock cannot be put back. It is a profound and anxious desire to arrest decay. But if the dysfunctional trends continue, that anxiety will turn to fear, and even panic. And when fear comes to dominate social policy, reason and tolerance are at risk. That is our predicament.

By Mortimer B. Zuckerman

Works Cited

Zuckerman, Mortimer B. "Where have our values gone?." U.S. News & World Report 08 Aug. 1994: 88. MasterFILE Premier. EBSCO. [Library name], [City], [State abbreviation]. 20 February 2008.
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Where have our values gone?

1. What examples of social dysfunction are identified in this article?
2. What does “defining deviancy down” mean?
3. What subcultures are identified as being in conflict with each other?
4. Which “traditional American values” of America appear to have changed?
5. The author says “...we have a culture of constant complaint?” What does he mean by this and why does he think this is a problem?
6. What does “altruism” mean?
7. According to the author, a) in what ways are young people victimized by today’s culture and, b) do you agree?
 - a)
 - b)
8. “No wonder it is difficult to sustain parental values and parental continuity.” What does the author mean by this and do you agree?
9. What solutions are suggested (or would YOU suggest) to cure the culture of dysfunction?