

IPA-single parents-12-20-19

Alternative column titles:

When the circus came to town, or

The lost and unconnected among us

By Jim Nowlan

In this season of joy, I am reminded, as we all are, fleetingly, that not all share our joy. Several years ago, for example, the circus came to my rural town. A friend and I decided to ensure that all kids could have the very few bucks needed for tickets and some cotton candy. Fifteen single-parent families were quickly identified by a local church group as needing such help.

My first delivery was to a run-down small frame home. The young mother came to the screen door. The living room behind her was a mess; a stereotypical, louche boyfriend (I assume) was lounging on the sofa, watching TV; two kids were fussing in the background. What struck me was how grateful the mother, a bit disheveled, was for the tickets (at \$6 each) and the ten bucks for treats. What a miserable life, I thought.

Based on my chats with local teachers and social workers, there are lots of such households in rural central Illinois. I recall a county health department report that in a recent year 44 percent of all births in my county were to unmarried mothers, many maybe most ill-educated for today's world. In 1968, when I entered the state legislature, the national figure was 10 percent.

These families are invisible to most of us. They live in farm houses that would otherwise be abandoned, or in duplex and quadplex apartments in the small towns. Only one in five fathers

pays any child support, according to educated guesses by my social work friends. Most of these mothers are what I would call somewhat abandoned, lost and unconnected.

In contrast: I am working on a novel about a colorful Irish-American politician in post-World War II Chicago. This friend of mine came from a strong nuclear family, a close-knit Catholic Church parish, vibrant Irish fellowship societies, and his energetic political network. Talk about connected. If ever a problem arose, he had many supportive places to turn for help. Because of these many ties, this politico has led a successful and rewarding life.

We humans are social animals. We need human connections and supports like those of my Chicago friend.

Today, however, many rural families are in disarray. My kindergarten teacher friend tells of one family in her school with three children, each with a different last name. Her school no longer even bothers to list fathers' names in the pupils' informational databases.

Further, churches today are much less central in the lives of the unconnected, and small-town community ties are weak, as the unconnected mothers move frequently from one to another, I'm told, maybe for cheaper housing.

So, when her jalopy loses its brakes, struggling single mother has no connections to turn to find the \$500 needed to get her back on the road and to her job. "And transportation is a huge problem," says a social worker, "as you don't walk or take the bus to work in rural America."

It's enough to make this single mother turn to drink, and drugs, and many like her do, my social work friends tell me. This in turn drains scarce funds needed for the kids' school supplies and the basics.

Governments and private charities in my area bend over backward to help fill the gap. There are literally a score, or maybe even two score, of discrete housing, heating/cooling, child care, food stamp and food pantry, job training, health care and other programs out there.

Valuable as these are, the programs are fragmented, scattered. Last time I checked the Peoria phone book, I found nine separate state social service units for mental health, rehabilitation, substance abuse, and more—all with different physical office locations, and all 40 miles drive—in a junk jalopy, if one has a car—from my rural county.

And if, according to my social worker friends, a mother earns a good boost in pay at her low-wage job, she runs the risk of “falling off a cliff,” that is, losing her medical care card, child care, food stamps and other benefits. The mother may decide, rationally, that the relative certainty of all those programs is better than losing them to the uncertainty of a job of who knows what tenure.

What to do?

In the short term, create a sliding-scale transition from welfare to success at work. Rather than a scary cliff that drops government benefits cold turkey, reduce them slowly as a mother progresses to higher pay at work. This would provide an incentive, rather than today’s disincentive, to get off the dole.

Second, require parenting classes for mothers—and fathers where they can be found—receiving taxpayer support. Classes might include learning such basics as how to separate “wants from needs”; household budgeting, and how to create and support strong aspirations for career success among their children.

Finally, we need to think long and hard about how society can envelope the lost and unconnected. Government programs, which have proliferated, obviously won't alone do the job.