

SNG-Breaking the cycle-11-16-15

Breaking the cycle of family disarray

By Jim Nowlan

I have written before in this space about my concerns over the fraying, even unraveling, of The American Family. After talking recently with 15 school social workers in my rural area, I am more distraught than ever.

How do we break the cycle of one generation after another of single mothers unable to meet the needs of their children? I have a thought or two, but such probably won't go down easily with some readers.

I also worry that the influential "one percenters" along the prosperous lake shore north of Chicago, comfortably insulated from social mayhem elsewhere, have no clue about what is going on in small town Illinois where, ironically, many of their parents and grandparents grew up.

The school social workers I met with work for a cooperative of eight small town and rural school districts with maybe 7,000 students total, mostly white, non-Hispanic.

Extrapolating from figures for my own rural county, I am guessing that half the children in the cooperative come from single-parent families. In one district, in a small, once industrial town, 75 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches; in the other districts, 40-50 percent or more is typical.

We didn't have social workers when I was growing up in this area in the 1950s, not that things were idyllic back then.

Why do we need them today, I asked the mostly young, female social workers?

After a slow start, the social workers poured out their concerns.

There was a time when the classroom teachers could meet children's needs, but no longer, they said.

In many of the single-parent families, the mothers don't know how to parent—nor, any longer, do many of the grandparents!

One social worker is full-time at an alternative school for 60 “emotionally disabled” kids who can't handle regular schools. Only one of the 60 comes from an intact family.

The mothers are so busy bouncing among one, two, even three jobs, they don't have much time to spend with their kids.

Maybe in part out of a sense of guilt at not fulfilling the parental role adequately, a culture has been created where parents and children don't take responsibility.

In the 1950s, if a child received a bad grade, parents looked at the kids for answers. Today, parents scream at the teachers instead.

In sum, I gathered, the problems revolve around deficits of money, parenting skills, social support, and stability, as well as a growing sense of entitlement that others will/should solve their problems.

For young women, having a child is sometimes a way out of a bad home life and into public housing and other benefits—and to a dead-end future.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, I had a classmate named Ida Mae. She lived in the country, often came to school unkempt, but she was a nice girl.

Decades later from her home far away, Ida Mae wrote me a long, emotional letter. As a teen, she had been horribly abused by her step-father. She had an out-of-wedlock child.

As Ida Mae told it, a delegation of blue-haired ladies from the community came to evaluate her situation. They decided she could not take care of the child, so the authorities took

the child away, an unspeakably wrenching episode for Ida Mae. But she had no more children out of wedlock. (Later, Ida Mae married and had a decent life.)

I hope I don't have a mean bone in my body. Yet maybe taking a child away from a new young parent who has no idea whatever of how to rear the child, nor support in doing so, is a way to break the cycle. It would send a clamorous signal to other girls and young women.

I don't know. I am rather desperate for answers. We can't go on as we have been.

Many, not all, of the one-percenter see the way out as that of cutting taxes and spending, while they spend twice as much per student in their fine schools as we do in mine downstate.

I think that, in the short term certainly, we cannot afford to cut services further for day care and decent school services for the single-parent mothers.

But we have to break the cycle, somehow.