

## Families, Children, and Self-Sacrifice

*Kathleen Slaugh Bahr, associate professor of marriage, family, and human development, BYU, mother*

In an article published in *Population Bulletin*, March 1987, Dutch demographer, Dirk J. van de Kaa, describes what he calls Europe's second demographic transition. Both the first and second transitions were marked by changes in fertility rates. The first transition, which occurred in the mid- to late-1800s, was a transition to lower fertility rates dominated by concerns for family and offspring. The second demographic transition was the transition to a level well below replacement. Van de Kaa sets the date of the second demographic transition arbitrarily at 1965, after World War II and the baby boom that followed the war.

According to Van de Kaa, "Two key words characterize the norms and attitudes behind the first and second demographic transitions and highlight the contrasts between them: altruistic and individualistic" (1987, p. 5). While the first transition was a response to concerns for family and offspring, the second emphasized the rights and self-fulfillment of individuals.

Needless to say, European nations are not the only ones who experienced this transition. There is not a corner of the globe that is not at this moment feeling the impact of the transition from altruism to individualism. What do these concepts represent—a move away from a morality that expected each person to make sacrifices to ensure the common good, to a world where each person feels entitled to give priority to the supposed "needs" of the self, and where sacrificing self-interest in the interest of one's family is seen as a defect.

I would like to make an appeal to recover the morality of self-sacrifice. By self-sacrifice, I mean the willingness to set aside one's own self-centered interests in the interest of priorities or persons whose needs we see as more pressing than our own. In an earlier era, self-sacrifice was recognized as the measure of one's moral character; to be moral was to give unselfishly of one's time and talents to help others in need. Self-sacrifice was recognized as an essential component of family love. The "unselfish love" of husband and wife for each other, and for their parents, as well as the selfless love of parents for their children was seen as the heart and soul of morality.

Most family people today recognize, at some level, the necessity of self-sacrifice, particularly families grounded in a religious tradition. However, even in religious families, self-sacrifice seems to be under a cloud. We are all too familiar with the language and needs of "self." We talk of self-esteem and self-direction as if they were basic rights; we are all well

schooled in a language of "fairness" and "rights." But, as Bellah and his colleagues (1985, p. 109) discovered in their study of individualism and commitment in American life, even conservative religious families are uncomfortable with the language of sacrifice. They report:

On the whole, even the most secure, happily married of our respondents had difficulty when they sought a language in which to articulate their reasons for commitments that went beyond the self. These confusions were particularly clear when they discussed problems of sacrifice and obligation. While they wanted to maintain enduring relationships, they resisted the notion that such relationships might involve obligations that went beyond the wishes of the partners. . . . They were troubled by the ideal of self-denial the term "sacrifice" implied.

These findings should not surprise us. Over the last several years, particularly in our universities, we have been fed a steady diet of ideas dominated by rational choice theory, market models of human relationships, and "therapeutic" individualism. Love has been reduced to an emotional state, a feeling of liking, grounded in chemistry. The old morality grounded in selfless concern for the well being of others has been replaced with an ethic of duty to self.

Several years ago, I was invited to write a chapter of a book on family love. I was amazed to discover the scarcity of information under that label in the scholarly literature on the family. More recently, my husband and I wrote an article on self-sacrifice. Again, we encountered an almost total absence of the concept. In the indexes of books on family theory and family life education, one often searches in vain for "love," "sacrifice," or even partial synonyms such as altruism or caring.

While I am referring to American academic literature, I doubt there is a place on our planet that has not been touched by these silences. Those of you who work to defend the family on an international level must be especially aware of the consequences of the omission of these words and ideas from the language of daily life.

Language reflects our view of reality. The things that we think about are those things captured in our language. "We think because we have words, not the other way around," explains L'Engle (1980, p. 38). "When language is limited, I am thereby diminished, too. . . . When language becomes exhausted, our freedom dwindles—we cannot think; we do not recognize danger" (1980, pp. 37, 39–40). E. F. Schumacher,

author of *Small Is Beautiful* (1973, p. 106), observes that not only have we abandoned our ethical heritage, but we have made ethical discourse more difficult by devaluing many of the old, essential words, "We have even degraded the very words without which ethical discourse cannot carry on, words like 'virtue,' 'love,' 'temperance.'"

Of all the terms and phrases that merit redemption from the shrinking vocabulary of family virtue and family love, we maintain that sacrifice, or, more specifically, self-sacrifice is among the most important. Perhaps self-sacrifice remains a part of our culture and we merely lack the words to describe it. But the evidence demonstrates, throughout contemporary culture—from the highest levels down—that both our language and culture are increasingly alien to the notion of self-sacrifice. As an example, consider a review by Michael Linton of the two new operas premiered by the Metropolitan Opera in the 1990s. Linton concludes that while these operas differ in many ways, they share an attitude of "ravenous . . . assault upon the values of Western civilization" (Linton 1996, pp. 26, 28–29). "With these two commissions," he continues, "the postmodern aesthetic has entered the mainstream of Western high culture." These operas "are artifacts of a different moral world" from that of the Metropolitan Opera's older repertory. They represent "a world where forgiveness, sacrifice, justice, and discipline have little currency. Here discipline is only choosing between competing pleasures, justice whatever feels good at the moment, and religion the cult of sensuality. . . ."

There is an urgent need to resurrect an understanding of the fundamental importance of sacrifice. To help in that task, I will review the work of three scholars whose work informs us of the importance of self-sacrifice.

### Kinship, Morality, and Sacrifice

Anthropologist Merlin Myers, a professor at Brigham Young University, taught that self-sacrifice was an index of kinship solidarity. Exploring the meaning of kinship, he contrasted the morality of social relations among kindred with the morality that applied to others beyond the circle of kin. Judging from the anthropological evidence, he said that the domain of kinship is governed by a "morality characterized by kindness and a predisposition to love and care," while dealings with non-kin are governed by a less confining morality centered on the ethic of personal gain. He noted a current tendency for the ethic of gain to replace that of kinship, so that well-meaning "liberators" would "free those who would be responsible for children and parents . . . to pursue personal gain in one form or another."

Following the anthropologist Victor Turner, Myers identified love as "the basal principle of human social relationships" and he defined love in practice as one's willingness to sacrifice for another. "People must cease to sacrifice others for personal gain and begin to sacrifice themselves for one another," Myers urged. He defined self-sacrifice as "the

ready index to the moral quality of a relationship"—"If one is willing to sacrifice only a little, morality is small; if much, morality is great. The nature and quality of relationships can thus be seen as a correlate of the willingness of the persons involved to sacrifice for one another" (1983, p. 11).

Myers was convinced that one's willingness to sacrifice—or rather, the experience of having sacrificed, and been sacrificed for—was the essential glue of a moral society. The morality of kinship was a willingness to not "count the cost" in sacrificing for one's own, in contrast to the morality of the market that involves contracts, exchange, and profit motive. Myers warned that the morality of the marketplace was ultimately alienating, for it encouraged us to treat people as things and relationships as opportunities for profit. He concluded that today, the less-demanding morality of the market erodes the altruism of kinship.

Two years later, in their best-selling *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his associates (1985, p. 126) would independently repeat the Myers diagnosis. The problem, they said:

is not that intimacy is tyrannically taking over too much of public life. It is that too much of the purely contractual structure of the economic and bureaucratic world is becoming an ideological model for personal life. . . . The prevalence of contractual intimacy and procedural cooperation, carried over from boardroom to bedroom and back again, is what threatens to obscure the ideals of both personal virtue and public good.

In summary, the notion of morality is inseparable from love is inseparable from self-sacrifice.

### The Economics of Love

The second scholar whose work contributes to our understanding of the importance of self-sacrifice is U.S. economist Kenneth Boulding. A useful treatment of the power of sacrifice appears in Boulding's *The Economy of Love and Fear*. Boulding, in seeking to learn "how things come to hold together and how they fall apart," compared two types of good transfers: the grant, or one-way transfer, and the exchange, a two-way transfer. He identified two types of grants: the tribute, motivated by fear, and the gift, motivated by benevolence or love. Boulding depicted the extraordinary power of a benevolent, one-way transfer to build social solidarity, i.e., the power of gifts, motivated by love, to bind people together. In his scholarship, Boulding describes how the effects of the benevolent gift ripple through the community via "serial reciprocity" and "multiplier effects." He advises:

Think of the process perhaps in epidemiological terms . . . the original gift giver becomes a source of infection of benevolence. The infection may lose its intensity as it goes through a number of receivers and subsequent givers, but under some circumstances it may increase in

intensity as it triggers off previously latent benevolent feelings. . . . The gifts . . . need not be commodities. They may be merely communications—smiles, courtesies, hellos, small favors, and so on (1973, p. 27).

There are also pathologies of gift-giving. In discussing these, Boulding emphasizes the power of sacrifice over exchange as a source of strong social bonds:

A gift helps to create the identity of the giver, and a gift either to an individual or to a cause or community identifies the giver with the recipient. . . . Thus, the gift builds itself into the identity of the giver; in pathological cases he can become trapped into a disadvantageous identification with the society, organization, or cause for which he has sacrificed. . . . Up to a point the principle may be a healthy one, *for without the kind of commitment or identity which emerges from sacrifice, it may well be that no communities, not even the family, would really stay together.* Exchange has no such power to create community, identity, and commitment, perhaps because it involves so little sacrifice (1973, p. 28, emphasis added).

In other words, the sacrifices we make for others form the glue that holds families and communities together. Without this glue, families and communities—and individuals—suffer the problems we have already heard about.

Social systems, like golf courses, have built-in traps, and among the several traps inherent in a grants economy are a “dependency trap,” in which well intended gifts contribute to long-term incapacities in the receivers, and a “sacrifice trap,” in which the giver becomes “locked into an identity that may demand too much sacrifice.”

A grant is a sacrifice we may make in the interests of our identity, for our identity depends very largely on the community with which we identify. If this community demands sacrifices from us, our identification with it is reinforced. . . . Sacrifice creates sacredness. Sacredness, like every other virtue . . . becomes a vice if there is too much of it . . . however, we cannot solve the problem by denying all sacrifice and all sacredness, for up to a point, both sacrifice and sacredness give meaning and significance to human life and are positive values (1973, pp. 98–99).

Boulding emphasizes the relation between sacrifice and the identity of the giver. Sacredness and meaning are viewed from the standpoint of the giver. In the sacrifice trap, it is the giver who is trapped. Yet the value of the gift, even its very definition as gift, depends upon the situation and need of the receiver. There are negative as well as positive grants, and malevolent as well as benevolent motives for giving.

Much of the negative press about sacrifice involves alleged pathologies of sacrifice, sacrifice that is inappropri-

ate, meaningless, or harmful. We acknowledge such pathologies, but doubt that their existence justifies the neglect of sacrifice as an essential social process, the basis of meaning in life, and a powerful source of human bonding and community solidarity.

One might expect that so powerful a social bonding agent as sacrifice would have received much attention from family professionals. But, they, like the economists (Boulding 1973, p. 34), have concentrated on exchange as the primary social organizer, viewing families through a lens that highlights self-interest and the morality of the market. In the process, they have overlooked the fundamental place of the one-way transfer or grant, the grant motivated by other-interest, the sacrifice born of love.

### Maternal Thinking

One of the best descriptions of self-sacrifice that is likely to yield positive results, the kind most likely to foster the growth of the receiver, is found in the work of philosopher Sara Ruddick. Several years ago, I read her article “Maternal Thinking” (1984). In it, Ruddick identifies basic demands children make of their parents—that their lives be preserved, and their growth fostered in ways acceptable to their social world. The notion that children need mothers and fathers to help them satisfy these demands, i.e., to nurture their life and foster their growth, is not a new idea. What Ruddick refreshingly illustrates is that those whose interest it is to nurture life, who care for children in ways suited to fostering their growth, also grow by nurturing. They develop characteristic ways of thinking, what Ruddick refers to as “maternal thinking,” better said “moral thinking.” Moral thinking is heart thinking (Proverbs 23:7, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he”), and it manifests itself in the capacity to love. Ruddick identifies two kinds of love that develop as one nurtures the life of a child: preservative love, or the love aimed at preserving the life of a child, and attentive love, the love aimed at fostering the growth of the child. She points out that heart-thinking is unlike the “head” thinking of science or the thinking of business and industry.

In addition, she identifies that moral attributes develop as one learns to love in ways that preserve life and foster growth, including the attributes of humility, resilient cheerfulness, and the capacity to know the child well enough to know what will foster growth. Particularly interesting and relevant to the our concerns today are the “temptations” or “defects” Ruddick identifies that get in the way of nurturing (Table 1).

What do all these “defects” have in common? The focus on the self, on one’s “supposed” self-interest rather than on the best interest of the child.

I particularly like Ruddick’s description of the quality of attention required to best know what will foster a child’s growth, and also her description of the enemy of quality of attention. Ruddick draws on the work of Simon Weil and Iris Murdoch:

Table 1

**Virtues Associated with Each Type of Love:****Preservative Love**

Preservation of life

Stewardship (holding; respect for uniqueness of individual person)

Humility

Resilient cheerfulness

**Attentive Love**

Responsiveness to growth

Ability to change with change

Submission to what is needed for growth

Capacity for attention, "a special knowledge of the individual"

**Defects (What counts as failure?):**

Excessive control, rigidity, fearfulness

Acquiring (frantic possession)

Self-effacement, "learned helplessness"

Cheery denial

Control, through "repeatable experiments"

Self-centered aims and images

For Weil and Murdoch, the enemy of attention is . . . the "proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images." [It] is intellectual and imaginative activity in the service of consolation, domination, anxiety, and aggrandizement. It is reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain, self-induced blindness designed to protect it from insight. . . . Attention to real children, children seen by the "patient eye of love, . . . teaches us how real things [real children] can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self."

In other words, preservative love and attentive love require self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of self-centered aims and interests in order to give the quality of attention required to know the child. As a mother, this makes a lot of sense to me. When one of my children misbehaves, if my first response is irritation at the trouble the child is causing me: "Why are you inconveniencing me with your crying, or your fighting?" Then my self-concern blinds me to the real needs of my child. On the other hand, if I pay attention to the child instead of thinking of my own pain and I ask, "What is going on here? Why is this child behaving this way? What is my child going through?" I am often guided to a knowledge of my child that helps me more clearly understand what is needed. Undoubtedly, this quality of love requires self-sacrifice. It requires that one set aside her own self-centered interests in the interest of fostering the well being of the child.

In a subsequent article, Ruddick (1987) compares her work with the so-called "morality of care" pioneered by psychologist Carol Gilligan. Gilligan identifies self-sacrifice not as a virtue, but as a defect. It is one thing to ignore self-sacrifice. It is another to cast it as pathology. This new, politically correct idea—that self-sacrifice is a defect—is a product of a "new morality" commonly described as the morality of care.

**Self-Sacrifice as Pathology: The "Ethic of Caring"**

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the priority of self-sacrifice as personal and social virtue is the rejection of self-sacrifice as a feminine ideal in versions of the feminist "ethic of caring." The idealization of motherhood, and the notion that mothers should sacrifice themselves for their children, is a particular point of attack. Among the most recognized proponents of an ethic of caring that devalues maternal sacrifice is Gilligan, whose book, *In a Different Voice* (1982), claimed a pattern of moral development among women not based in, and not inferior to, the values of justice and authority associated with moral development among men. Gilligan's model of the morality of caring and connection has spawned a vast literature; now there are many versions of the "care ethic." Most of the literature designates self-sacrifice as a defect. In response to criticisms that her work romanticizes female care, Gilligan (1993, p. 209) says:

I portray twentieth-century women choosing to have abortions, as well as women . . . reconsidering what is meant by care in light of their recognition that acts inspired by conventions of selfless feminine care have led to hurt, betrayal, and isolation . . . in contrast to the paralyzing image of the "angel in the house," I describe a critical ethical perspective that calls into question the traditional equation of care with self-sacrifice.

Her argument against sacrifice is stated in a critique of an extreme type, "the tendency for women, in the name of virtue, to give care only to others and to consider it 'selfish' to care for themselves" (1993, p. 213). A practical consequence of this is the validation of an ethic that denies the legitimacy of self-sacrifice *in general*, not merely at the pathological extreme where any care of self is seen as selfish. Recognizing that needs for care will continue to be unmet by people who reject self-sacrifice, part of the debate over the morality of care is a "politics of care" wherein the responsibility for care is shifted to the government.

Among the advocates of such a shift is Julia Wood, who criticizes Gilligan's "different voice" as "a distinctly conservative one that affirms traditional sex roles" (1994, p. 162). Wood values caregiving, but insists that today's burden of care for both children and the elderly is so daunting, and the traditional allocation of care so harmful to women, that the government must step forward and assume ultimate responsibility:

For caring to be safe for caregivers, it must be broadly supported and enacted, rather than relegated to particular groups of people. Our culture itself must be reformed in ways that dissociate caring from its historical affiliations with women and private relationships and redefine it as a centrally important and integral part of our collective public life (1994, p. 163).

Making caring safe for caregivers means taking much self-sacrifice out of it, which we do by making it paid work, part of the market, subject to the gain ethic.

We agree that care and sacrifice should be everyone's responsibility. It belongs to no group or category. Indeed, self-sacrifice is properly a *family* characteristic, a trait that characterizes all family members old enough to give of themselves, however modestly. But, it is in the nature of sacrifice that its "safety" is never guaranteed. It is necessarily open-ended, defined by another's need. Caring as moral behavior disappears as it is shifted from the context of a personal and particular relationship to that of bureaucratic regulation. Work done close at hand for loved ones becomes work done for pay in the marketplace. We repeat—by definition, sacrifice cannot be safe for the sacrificer.

Some writers, recognizing that caring cannot always be safe for the caregiver, suggest minimizing its risks by managing and distributing them (Peters 1997). Others see a danger in the ethic of care in that one may care too much for others. They assert the need for a self-conscious equality of self and other, i.e., that one's own will and welfare must always be a primary concern.

One danger is that care is overly self-sacrificing so that one cares for others at the expense of caring well for oneself. The second danger is that care is limited to the sphere of personal relations so that one cares for one's family members and friends, but ignores the needs of anyone outside that limited sphere. . . . for the ethic of care the central motivational obstacle is the tendency to give the rights and interests of others *more* weight than we give our own, or self-sacrifice. Thus the ethic of care recognizes the equality of the self and other by including the self within the scope of care, or by promoting the self to equality with the other (Clement 1996, p. 113).

The central obstacle is the danger that a person will be too altruistic; the central concern is that one may give too much of oneself. That outcome can be avoided by an ethic that pro-

motes self to equality with others, as judged by the self. In response, we offer a version of the Heisenberg principle, namely that it is impossible to focus on two things at once. The careful attention to oneself, necessary to assure that the self does not sacrifice more than her share—that she cares for herself "well,"—means that her attention cannot be fully focused on the needs of the other. In place of Immanuel Levinas' principle that we are obligated by "the face of the other" (Bauman 1993, pp. 47–53, 71–75; Peperzak 1993, pp. 19–20), this ethic directs us to pay equal attention to one's own face in the mirror.

Some advocates of a political "morality of care" would further diminish the responsibility of family members to make sacrifices to each other. They add to the norm—that self-sacrifice is not appropriate—the requirement that care should not be partial to one's family or associates, that it be more universally or globally distributed. In practice, this means that obligations to one's own family do not take precedence over one's obligation to the families of Tibet or Thailand. The net consequence of this ethic is to demote family members to members of the global throng. Caring individuals must shift their concern for their families and neighbors, persons to whom they were formerly responsible and among whom their lives are lived, to the abstract citizens of the world. Its effect is to move moral responsibility from the proximate to the distant. There is a literature on the costs of diluting personal responsibility to proximate others. One of the most important costs described is that the globalization of care attenuates moral responsibility (Bauman 1991). The focus on the distant and abstract at the expense of the proximate means that one's obligations to one's own network of friends and kindred are greatly reduced.

Many ethic of care theorists lament the devaluing of care by society, the powerful, or the "oppressors." Yet, it seems that the devaluation of children and of those who care for them is common among both women and men whose choices have freed them from the "oppressive" responsibility of having and raising children. Such attitudes appear in many statements about children and their characteristics reported in Kathleen Gerson's *Hard Choices*. Gerson interviewed a sample of California women about the choices they faced in deciding about careers, marriage, and children. To illustrate a fairly common devaluation of children, we have strung together a summary list of adjectives and phrases from Gerson's interviews. This list is true to the dominant, if not general, image of children and child care conveyed in the quotations in Gerson's book. Noteworthy of these quotations was how rarely women who had children, or were planning to have them, celebrated the worth of the child in and of itself, rather than the child as consumer object, as something one's husband wanted, or a life experience the woman did not want to miss.

Children, actual or potential, were said to be—just a pain, a restriction on one's freedom, a nuisance, a tremendous burden, a physical drain, an emotional drain, noisy, and troublesome. They would, it was said, drive one nuts, cause all sorts of complications, stifle creativity and intellectualism, and ruin relationships. Among the reasons given for not wanting them were: "I want to be able to just pick up and go when I want to," "I don't think [children] would improve what I think of myself," "I would just probably be relegated to the drudgery of the house," "[They make you] ready for the looney farm," "If [a child] said, 'I need you,' it would make me go bananas," "We'd never be able to have a house like this, never be able to travel together again," "I'm afraid I will lose control over my life and my time," and "I don't think just raising kids would be fulfilling for me" (Gerson 1985, pp. 61–62, 75, 78–79, 133–134, 144, 182).

Rarely did statements on the burden and encumbrance of children refer to the burdens and encumbrances of life generally, of callings, careers, and most human enterprises. In the absence of standards of value or morality that indicate that trouble and hard work are worth it, there is no reason to judge family encumbrances as less meaningful than any other kind. In care and sacrifice, as in other behaviors, we do encounter pathologies based on "too much of a good thing." But, the fact that some mothers are exploited or burned-out does not justify the conclusion that self-sacrifice is at fault.

Exploitation and burnout also characterize non-family institutions. Indeed, as Lewis and Rose Laub Coser (1974) warn in their book, *Greedy Institutions*, it is the nature of organizations to demand more of you than you can give, and this applies across the board, from the corporation to the military, the family, church, and school, and certainly to the media with their incessant calls to watch and to buy, without regard to your bank balance, time budget, or life plan. Institutions are greedy, and to survive we learn to balance and sometimes decline their demands and opportunities. There is little ethical theory or scholarly alarm about the danger of "losing self" to the corporation, the military, the government, the television set, or the Internet. No one is out there warning of the dangers of sacrificing self to one's paid work. If a dollar sign is attached, it is not considered self-sacrifice. It is just the sacrifices one makes for one's family that are under attack.

No theory is free of the context in which it arises. All theories are based on assumptions tied to existing worldviews or power relations. The casting of self-sacrifice, especially of mothers, in negative terms is a function of theory oriented toward changing the world. A stated goal of feminist theory:

is to provide a conceptual framework that illuminates women's experiences and perspectives and suggests how women's oppression can be ended. . . . Explorations of the sources and forms of women's

oppression have focused on its relationship to the social assignment of the role or work of mothering . . . women's oppression is in some way connected to mothering." (DiQuinzio 1993, pp. 3–4)

No wonder, then, that characteristics formerly identified by society as the mark of superior mothering, namely self-sacrifice in the interests of children, should be seen as marks of oppression, and accordingly devalued. It is no wonder that self-sacrifice by men and children is typically overlooked in this framework—these sacrifices have a less obvious connection to women's oppression—or that the self-actualizing or personally positive consequences of sacrifice are neglected. If we focus on oppression, we are unlikely to see liberating or exalting effects; if we focus on the individual and her rights, we are unlikely to grant high priority to group cohesion or other social benefits.

Unfortunately, all this talk about securing the rights of the child is not so much about what is in the interest of children as it is about "liberating" adults from the necessity of making appropriate sacrifices to foster the well being of children.

*Recently Bahr and her husband adopted two boys from Russia: Dima, nine, and Anton, seven.*