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Thanking the Right Wing

Roberta Achtenberg†

I’m very happy to be here at Boalt Hall, and am pleased to be in the presence of Dean Herma Hill Kay, for whom I have a great deal of respect. I see that lately she has been at the center of a great deal of controversy and is being treated virtually like a politician.¹ The public reaction to this controversy shows a clear misunderstanding of what we are trying to do at Boalt Hall. I think that we can be very proud of the strides we are making in the name of diversity.

The Civil Rights Speaker Series Committee asked me if I would speak with you a little about the political implications of the most recent attack that has emanated from the right wing: the new bludgeon of “family values.” “Family values” has become the latest catch phrase for the suggestion that “my family” is of value and “yours” is somehow lacking. This suggestion comes at a time when we have very few women in positions of power, in a period of exaggerated economic decline, when this country is ceasing to be—and perhaps appropriately so—the most important positive power in the world. The United States has had few “wins” in recent times. For some people, to be able to say, “my family is better than your family,” “I’m bigger than you are,” “I’m more important than you are” might feel like a win, in an era when people have had so few.

I believe that family life today is difficult in many ways, and it rarely

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¹ Supervisor Achtenberg refers to the controversy surrounding Boalt Hall’s admissions policy, which was investigated by the Office of Civil Rights for possibly employing a quota system.
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conforms to the societal image of family life in the “good old days.” Work is harder to get. People are experiencing pain. Many feel isolated within their own families, and that is confusing. I think it’s hard to figure out why our family life is often unrewarding in so many respects. For many people, the family is really not the complete vehicle for individual economic survival, intellectual stimulation, sexual gratification, emotional sustenance, and total self-fulfillment that the mythology has led us to expect.

When the right wing decries the loss of “traditional family values,” it has merely found a convenient scapegoat to explain away the tremendous difficulties that so many American families currently face. This latest theory holds women, lesbians, and gays responsible for the “disintegration” of the family. All other factors which affect the quality of life for American families are overlooked.

Let’s consider, for example, the phenomenon of children living in poverty. I think most people in this society consider this to be a major problem for families. When we think about the number of children who have the support of only one parent, instead of blaming that one parent, perhaps we should look to the other factors. There are far too many men in our society who father children and then fail to take responsibility for them. These children are left with only their mothers’ income for support. This is not an effort to make women into Madonnas and men into culprits. In fact, the whole situation is more complex than pointing a finger at any one group and saying, “Aha! This is the cause of our pain and disorientation.”

Women in our society are discriminated against in the workplace and earn an average of seventy cents for every dollar earned by a man. Some confront sexual harassment at work, which can cut short a career or at the very least prevent these women from achieving their true potential. Some go home to endure domestic violence.

I’m not saying that all women face this most extreme set of circumstances, but we know that, for women, these additional phenomena exist. If a woman is lucky enough to get through all of these obstacles, she’s very likely to come up against the glass ceiling. That’s what most of you in the audience will experience at some point in your work life, even if you’re not a victim of domestic violence at home, even if you earn more than seventy cents for every dollar a man earns, and even if you’re not subject to sexual harassment or some other overt gender-based discrimination at work. The result of all of these factors is that it often becomes very difficult for women to make ends meet.

Therefore, it becomes very difficult for many single mothers to support their children. It is hard to move with your children to the suburbs if you are working at a minimum wage job. You can’t guarantee them a quality education because you can’t get that where you can afford to live.
The parks aren’t safe, and there is no one to provide your children with healthy recreation. The children grow up in a dangerous environment, with no health care, substandard housing, and poor education. These children are less well-equipped, technically and emotionally, to succeed in an increasingly technological and complex world.

The “family values” theory suggests that it is these women who are failing their children. It puts the blame on these women for our society’s creation of what I think most recognize as a generation of children who will fail and whose family lives will crumble before our eyes. Such a theory is obviously simplistic, and, in my opinion, nonsense. But this is what we hear described in thirty-second sound bites, and in the propaganda emerging from the convention of a certain political party that will go unnamed. Single mothers, and the loss of “traditional family values” that they represent, are responsible for the poverty and pain plaguing our society.

I’m going to talk a little bit about certain other things that the “family values” argument is supposed to mean. It’s supposed to be a code word, I believe, for more than misogyny and blaming women for society’s failure to provide for a generation of children. It’s also meant to stand for a way that “decent folks” can say “I’m straight and good, and you are gay or lesbian and bad. It’s the gays and lesbians who are tearing our families apart.”

Many gays and lesbians are involved in efforts—we call them efforts to love and protect our partners, to adopt or to give birth, to otherwise parent and raise children. We’re told that not only is this a pathetic substitute for a “real” family, but that somehow we threaten “real” families at their core.

I think that there are things that are threatening real families, of all kinds, at their core. But I doubt that one of these factors is lesbians and gays struggling to keep things together and having no more or less success than their heterosexual counterparts, matched for age, geographical region, economic class, color, and every other label. I’m not suggesting that we are doing the greatest job in the world, but I was a divorce lawyer for many years, and I can tell you we’re not doing the worst job, either.

It seems to me that the public is, surprisingly enough, not being completely hoodwinked by this new “family values” attack. I’m both surprised and pleased that, in a way, perhaps the right wing is helping us along a little bit. The rhetoric goes, “My family fits the prescribed mold and yours doesn’t.” The suggestion is that there is a line being drawn between “us” and “them.” But so many of us are “thems” when those lines get drawn that people begin to feel isolated, left out. I think more people understand themselves to be outside the “traditional family” stereotype than the Republican Party had estimated. Perhaps the right wing
has unwittingly given a boost to those of us who, like your Dean and my colleagues, have been fighting for years to assert the dignity of the struggle to maintain and protect all kinds of families.

There is not much information gained when one says, "Your family is not structured like mine and therefore . . . " And therefore what? It's not a family? We have been fighting for a long time for the recognition that legitimate, good, decent, constructive families can come in a whole lot of shapes and sizes and colors and kinds, and that we might want to measure their value on the basis of the kind of love and support they provide for their members. Families should not be evaluated on the basis of whether or not they measure up to a mythical ideal that is so different from the way that so many people experience family life. Fitting a mold is not necessarily a virtue in and of itself.

This is not to say that you can't have a good family if you are a monogamous, married, heterosexual, middle-class couple with 2.3 children, a dog, a cat, and a split-level ranch in the suburbs. I think it's perfectly possible in those circumstances to get the most that family life has to offer, but it's not, as we all know, a guarantee. A woman raising two children, providing for them by the sweat of her brow, and doing the best she can to love them and build their self-esteem is not a family with a deficiency, or another kind of family, or another class of family. She just may have to travel a much harder road than a two-parent, two-income family. She should be respected, not vilified, for this effort.

I would like to conclude by returning to my theory that the right wing may have inadvertently helped us along in our struggle. It turns out that people are smarter than the Republicans predicted. People understand that objective circumstances like the recession are responsible for a great deal of the pain that so many of us are experiencing. It should come as no surprise that most Americans believe that the economy is the foremost problem the nation has to confront. If there is one factor which you can point to that is perhaps the prime cause of the deterioration and difficulties facing today's families, it has a lot more to do with a failure of the economy than a failure of morality, or a failure to measure up to some cookie-cutter vision of how families are supposed to be. And I think the electorate realizes this.

So, in that light, I just wanted to say "thanks" to the two Pats, to Phyllis, and to Jerry. I don't know that we could have done it without them.

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2 Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, Phyllis Schlafly, and Jerry Falwell.