

THE DIRECTOR'S VIEW

OUR THREE-WAY JUGGLING ACT

As I write this column, Valentine's Day is just around the corner. Though its roots are in the Roman fertility festival of Lupercalia, Pope Gelasius recast the Roman holiday in 496 as a Christian festival, St. Valentine's Day. Rather than focusing on the propagation of offspring, the modern Valentine Day's has been dedicated to the celebration of romantic love and marriage.

This reframing of Valentine's Day to emphasize romance over children got me thinking about the way we tend to cast the dilemmas of the modern working family. We seem to think about middle-class families as if they were juggling conflicting priorities between work and family. We treat the family as if it were a coherent domain with no internal contradictions of its own. Any family therapist will tell a different story.

If we are to conceive of ourselves as jugglers, we should remember that no juggler worthy of the name ever contended with keeping just two things going. Real juggling only begins when a third object is set in motion. Anyone can manage two balls. But throw a third ball into the air; now you're juggling!

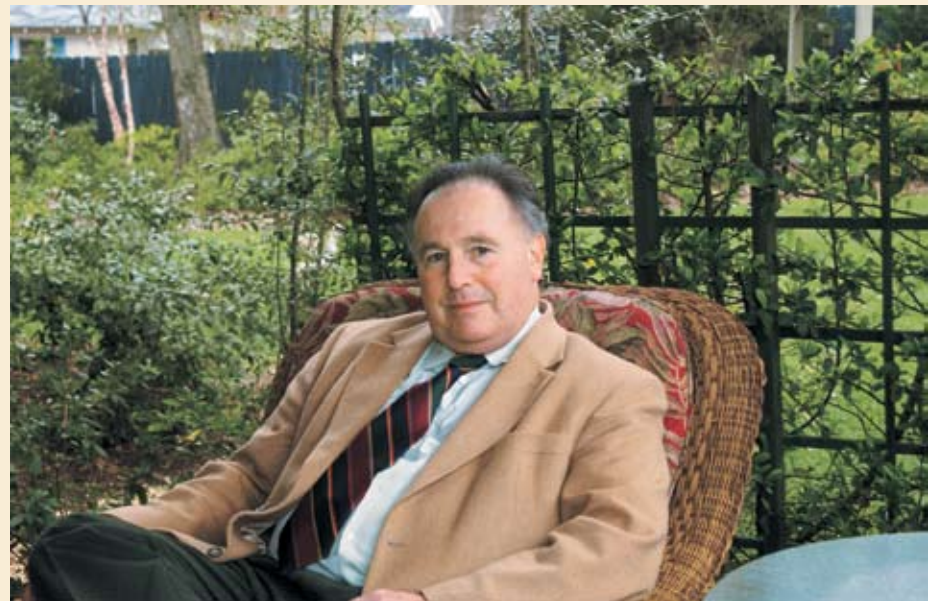
It is the same with our modern working lives. Although we may think of ourselves as balancing family and work, the real juggling act starts when kids enter the picture. Then families are involved with a three-way juggling act: keeping up with the contending demands of work, children, and marriage.

It is all too easy to overlook the marriage part. With nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce and with so many of our households headed by single parents, marriage sometimes seems to have gotten factored out of the juggling routine. Yet two-parent families are hardly extinct; and, of these, families where both partners are employed currently comprise the majority of two-parent households. For these families, keeping the marriage going is very much a part of the work-life struggle.

Attention to children and marriage may seem like two sides of the same coin. In reality, they often engage serious trade-offs. As the culture of family life has changed, there are significant generational changes in the way in which families have managed complex relations among work, marriage, and parenthood. Many Baby Boomers grew up in a world in which there was relatively little involvement of parents in the lives of their kids. There was certainly love and concern for our welfare, but missing was the kind of intense involvement of parents in the lives of their school-age kids that we see today.

Parents rarely had the time or interest to attend to their kids' activities. I never expected my parents to show up at my Little League games, and they almost never did. They were too busy working and would find out about the game at dinnertime. Although our parents' marriages were far from perfect, few of my friends grew up in what we called "broken homes." Divorce was the exception.

Perhaps it was the fact that so many of our fathers had gone overseas to fight in World War II, but for those who returned there was a distinct feeling that the relations between mother and father came first. Mothers often had to referee between the kids and an absentee



father, who was too preoccupied with work to be around much for his kids. Even as a mother of this era often was caught in the middle, her primary loyalty lay with her marriage. It is this world that Arthur Miller so powerfully depicts in *Death of a Salesman*. When push came to shove, Linda's loyalty was with Willie, even when he hadn't really deserved it.

Many of us Boomers seem to have reacted to this pattern of "marriage trumps parenthood" by reversing the trend. Having grown up as kids in a world that emphasized the solidarity of parents, we devote ourselves to what we consider "involved" parenting. Wives are "soccer moms," and on weekends kids' sports activities become family affairs. Suburban life often means that parents count on their kids' activities and friends for their own social networks. Our parents had made their friends from adult ties within their communities, but we often hang out with the parents of our kids' friends or teammates.

Involved parenting seems like a good thing. However, in the context of the competing demands of work, marriage, and parenting, something had to give—and that something may well be the solidarity of the marriage tie. At least that is what our divorce statistics may suggest.

Our research at the MARIAL Center indicates that the three-way juggling act may differ not only over time but among different American ethnic groups. Riche Daniel's forthcoming study of middle-class African American working families suggests significant differences in how white and black working mothers understand the tensions among work, marriage, and childcare. For middle-class African American women, expectations of marriage seem never to have trumped a focus on either work or children.

Suddenly the picture of middle-class family life seems much more complicated. Reframing the juggling act to emphasize the trade-offs among work, marriage, and kids may give us a far more nuanced and interesting view of the dilemmas of modern working families. ■

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