

## How Families Have Changed

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Over the river, and through the wood,  
To Grandfather's house we go;  
the horse knows the way to carry the sleigh  
through the white and drifted snow.

Do you remember singing that song? Did you sing it when you were young?

Did you sing it again ten days ago, on the way to celebrate Thanksgiving?

My answers to those questions are yes and yes and no.

When I was a kid, people gathered with their families for Thanksgiving. My father and mother and my two sisters would drive in late November to Springfield, Massachusetts. My grandmother lived there on the same block where my father was born. We would all be at my grandmother's for Thanksgiving, including my two aunts and their husbands and my cousins.

It was very much like this famous painting by Norman Rockwell that most of us remember from the Saturday Evening Post. SHOW IT. We all waited for the moment when my grandmother proudly served the turkey as we sat around the table crowded with food.

The typical American family we knew when we were young consisted of one mother, one father, maybe two or three kids.

It was that way in the neighborhoods of my childhood. It was also that way in the popular culture.

Remember "Father Knows Best"? That was a radio show from 1949 to 1954 and then a TV show from 1954 to 1960. Robert Young played Jim Anderson, the wise and kindly father. His wife, Margaret, was played by Jane Wyatt. Their children were Betty, Bud and Kathy.

I watched that show every week together with my parents and two sisters. I felt that our family was the Anderson family.

That's not the family of today. Recent articles in the New York Times show the many ways that families of today differ dramatically from the families we knew even a few years ago.

This week, New York Times writer Frank Bruni's column was titled "The Families We Invent." He wrote that many of us have voluntary relationships that can be deeper and more satisfying than the family relationships like those in "Father Knows Best." His column summarizes some of these relationships described in a new book called "Ties That Bind."

The book showcases conversations from the StoryCorps project. The project is an evolving oral history that records pairs of individuals talking about the sacrifices each has made for the other, the favors bestowed, the forgiveness granted. Perhaps you've heard those conversations on NPR. Dave Isay, the founder of StoryCorps, culled about 40 of these encounters for the book.

What struck Bruni most forcefully was how many of the people featured in the book had found extraordinary, enduring intimacy outside of traditional family structures. These tales of deep friendship help us understand that the modern idea of family need not be only or even chiefly about common genes or conventional marriage.

The tales in "Ties That Bind" are valuable reminders of diversity during this merrymaking, reunion-heavy season. It's often true at this time of year that the term "family" is invoked in terms too narrowly traditional. Those terms fail to recognize that former schoolmates, fellow congregants, neighbors or other friends can mean every bit as much to us as any actual relatives do.

One example in the book is a woman named Chelda. She was 24 in 2009, when she and her best friend, Georgia, two years older, recorded the conversation that appears in "Ties That Bind."

"I remember growing up and picturing this fairy-tale life," Chelda said, mentioning two of television's happiest tribes, the Brady bunch and the Huxtables. [I guess Chelda is too young to remember "Father Knows Best."] Chelda didn't have the family network that she wanted. She decided that her friend, Georgia, would fill the gap. She clung to her. And when she got pregnant unexpectedly during graduate school, it was Georgia who rushed to her side and stayed there.

"Ties That Bind" includes amazing testimony to our ability to make and sustain connections with each other. For example, a woman describes how she has maintained constant contact with the man who killed her only son. The killer served 17 years in prison for his crime. At

the time of their recorded conversation in 2011, he was out of prison and living next door to her. She was calling him “son.” And he was professing his love for her. He was helping to fill the very hole in her life that he, with a bullet, had created.

In the same book we read about teachers and students whose closeness transcended and outlasted the classroom. Those tales remind me of our relationship with Alice’s high school Latin teacher, Dr. Edith Kovach. She so inspired Alice that Alice decided not only to become a Latin teacher, but to become Dr. Kovach. Alice had to introduce me to Dr. Kovach very soon after we were married. We e kept in close touch with her for her whole life, always visiting her when we were in Detroit. When my son Sam and I drove together to California a few years ago, we planned our trip to pass through Detroit just so we could see Dr. Kovach and have a meal with her. When she died at age 85, Alice was one of many students of Dr. Kovach who attended her funeral. Dr. Kovach was a beloved member of our extended voluntary family.

Just before Thanksgiving the Times devoted an entire issue of Science Tuesday to the subject of family. The headline was “The Changing American Family.” The series began with these words: “American households have never been more diverse, more surprising, more baffling.”

The typical American family has become multilayered and full of surprises. Researchers who study the structure and evolution of the American family express astonishment at how rapidly the family has changed in recent years.

One expert said, “This churning, this turnover in our intimate partnerships is creating complex families on a scale we’ve not seen before. It’s a mistake to think this is the endpoint of enormous change. We are still very much in the midst of it.”

Researchers have identified at least three emerging themes:

First, families are more ethnically, racially, religiously and stylistically diverse than half a generation ago and in some ways even half a year ago. In increasing numbers, blacks marry whites, atheists marry Baptists, Christians marry Jews, men marry men and women marry women.

Second, good friends are joining forces as part of the “voluntary kin” movement. They share medical directives. They execute wills leaving property to each other. They even legally adopt one another.

And third, single people are living alone and proudly considering themselves families of one.

In charting the differences between today's families and those of the past, demographers start with the kids — or rather the lack of them.

The nation's birthrate today is half of the rate of fifty years ago. Last year, the birthrate hit its lowest point ever.

Fewer women of childbearing age are becoming mothers — about 80 percent today versus 90 percent in the 1970s. Those who reproduce do so more sparingly, averaging two children apiece now, compared with three in the 1970s.

As steep as the fertility decline has been, the marriage rate has fallen more sharply. This is particularly true among young women, who do most of the nation's childbearing. As a result, 41 percent of babies are now born out of wedlock. That is a fourfold increase since 1970.

The rise of the cohabiting couple is another striking feature of the evolving American family. Do you remember the term POSSLQ? P O S S L Q? It means "Persons of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters."

The Census Bureau used the term POSSLQ in just one census, the one taken in 1980. By the time of the next census, cohabitation had become so common that the Census Bureau abandoned the term "POSSLQ" and simply asked directly about "unmarried partners."

One change in family life that I could not have imagined when I was a young man is the phenomenon of same sex marriage. In my own youth, homosexuality was rarely mentioned. Though I am sure now that some of my friends at that time were gay, we did not know that then.

How the world has changed. In this country the federal government was forced by the Supreme Court to grant to legally married same sex couples the same federal benefits available to all other married couples. Same sex marriages may now be performed legally in fifteen states and the District of Columbia, as well as eight counties in New Mexico and eight Native American tribal jurisdictions. These areas cover 34% of the US population. Illinois joined this group with legislation enacted last month, to take effect next June. More, I am sure, will follow, either through legislation or litigation.

The same phenomenon now extends internationally. Sixteen countries allow same sex marriages. Five other countries are considering the adoption of such laws.

What do I hope we learn from these new configurations of the family?

I hope we take comfort from these facts.

If we are single, either never yet married or have suffered a loss of a spouse through death or divorce, we are not alone. Millions of Americans are just like us.

If a son or daughter is estranged from us, we are not alone. In so many families, the old pattern of lifelong connection between parents and their children no longer applies.

This can be a result of our increased mobility. A daughter may be raised in New York City but may leave after college and spend the rest of her days in Seattle, rarely seeing her parents. If that is our story, we are not alone.

When I spoke about the song “Over the river and through the woods” I said that I do remember that song and I used to sing it, but this year I did not. We did not have this year the traditional Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving.

Alice and I have two sons. Ben spent the holiday with his wife’s family. Sam preferred to spend the holiday with some cousins rather than come with Alice and me to New York. We were there to celebrate Thanksgiving at the home of Alice’s graduate school roommate, Jane, a dear friend for nearly 50 years. We have shared many holidays with Jane and her family. I consider her in the category of “voluntary kin” I described earlier.

Temple B’nai Shalom is itself an extended family for many of us. This congregation often provides the love and friendship that in times past might have been limited to our immediate or extended families.

The world of Father Knows Best is no longer our world. Rather than finding this new reality to be a source of apprehension or concern, I hope we can find this new reality one in which we are able to make choices about the families to which we belong, whether families of birth or families of friendship.

These new realities are here to stay. I hope that recognizing these developments may help us to find them familiar and even comforting.