Who Belongs in Your Family?

Dean Davidson, Graduates, Families, Colleagues and Friends. Thanks to you all. To the About-to-Be Graduates, I am deeply honored to be part of your celebration. I will be asking you a simple question this morning. Here it is: “Who Belongs in Your Family?” This is not a trick question, but it’s not straightforward either. I can guess that your first answer, rightly so, would be all those people out there sitting behind you. Yes, your mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents and more, related to you by the mingled ties of blood, marriage, and affection. I was told by Dean Munson that your guests were even welcome to bring the family dog, so long as it was on a leash. So your proud families came. Many took time off work, found parking places, and turned up to honor each of you. They are literally behind you now, but they have had your backs for years.

So, women of the Douglass Graduating Class of 2010, I invite you now to stand up, turn around, and let these wonderful people hear you say Thank You, loud and clear, and from your hearts (pause).

Back now to our question, “Who Belongs in Your Family?” I remember pondering this question as a child and an amateur family sociologist. I suspect lots of you did too. The problem was, like most kids, I got a lot wrong. I took my own middle-class, white family and neighborhood as a baseline for generalizing about all families, period. Most children in that now vanishing world had two resident married parents, one of each sex, with mother as homemaker and father as provider. They also had one to three siblings -- an older brother in my own case. And of course they had a dog. That, 60 years ago, was my first definition of who belonged in my family.

One day, by the way, my father decided that our beloved dog, a spaniel named Smoky, no longer belonged in our family. Dad had had it with Smoky, who spent his days in the back yard of our corner house taking his job of family protector entirely too seriously. He barked at any postman or deliveryman, and many of them complained, usually to my mother as she was the one likeliest to be home. One morning unbeknownst to the rest of us, Dad put Smoky in the back seat of his car and drove to work, several miles from South Minneapolis into St. Paul. He stopped, opened the door, let Smoky out, and drove on to his office. Days later Dad told us kids that he had driven home that night full of remorse, wondering how he would explain our missing dog. Well guess what? He didn’t have to explain. Smoky had beaten him home, and jumped up and down wagging his tail to greet Dad as he drove up our driveway. Smoky knew he belonged in our family, and we forgave Dad. We realized he wouldn’t have had to tell us what he did.

So, “Who Belongs in Your Family?” Today there are more pet dogs than ever, about 65 million, and most owners claim them as family members.

Early this month there was a troubling news flash in the N.Y. Times about contemporary American families. It was about parents suffering because their young adult children have stopped seeing them, or even communicating with them. This is a growing problem, we were told, even in families where children have not experienced
obvious cruelty or trauma such as abuse or addiction. We are talking instead about things like conflicts over money or a boyfriend, or resentment over their parents’ divorce. The article touched a nerve with readers. The last time I looked, there were hundreds of heartbreaking responses, many from angry, sad, and estranged children as well as parents.

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The reason the human misery on display in these accounts occurs more frequently these days, ironically I suppose, is that families in many ways have become less powerful and more porous institutions, defined more by choice than necessity. It is easier to abandon them if you choose. And even though women still earn less than men, more young women as well as men can now support themselves on their own. Families are also institutions governed more these days by democracy than dictatorship. Not only do moms as well as dads get a vote, kids get votes too. Your parents would probably agree with me that kids’ votes matter more in families nowadays than when they were growing up. All this choice means, in turn, that people are freer to make bad choices as well as good ones. They are also freer to disagree about which are good choices and which bad.

True, you still don’t get to choose your parents, but your choices about how you craft your own family future after that are greater, for women now as well as men, than ever before in history. We know, too, that more good choices are being made, for you and by you. For example even though a number of your parents did not attend college themselves, they are likelier than ever to try to ensure that daughters as well as sons get college degrees. Women now can stay single by choice, and be less likely to be labeled spinsters or “old maids” by one crowd, and “gays” or “dykes” by another – unless of course the single women in question are being nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court. Also women no longer have to stay single to pursue a career, as college-educated women as recently as my mother’s generation had to do. Mother’s parents, by the way, believed in college education for women -- still unusual in the 1930s -- and even though my grandmother never even finished high school, they sent their two daughters to the University of Minnesota. Still, my grandfather told each daughter that she was to major in Home Economics. Both did. Years later, mother, a lifelong homemaker, mentioned casually to me that she had once wanted to be a librarian.

So **Who Belongs in Your Family?** For most of you by now, statistics suggest that your future family will include two adult breadwinners and, at most, two offspring. I trust that you and your partner will also share the third job, or rather built-in cluster of jobs: namely, child-raiser, caregiver, housecleaner, and cook.

I note that a few moments ago you answered the question “Who Belongs in Your family?” in an inclusive way, confirming your various relatives out there as part of what is often called the extended family: namely, people mostly related to you but who may not all live under the same roof. Now if I had asked you the question “Who Belongs in Your Family?” in another context -- say in a classroom over there in Hickman Hall -- your first answer would more likely have been the people in your immediate family, namely those you lived with when you were growing up, your so-called nuclear family. Even then, your answers would vary. We already know now that six in ten among you were raised by both parents. While that is most of you, it is still fewer than your parents’
generation, which means that many of you already have a more expansive, non-traditional understanding of who counts as your core “family.” For example, the older generation for you may be represented by a single parent, a grandparent, parents who adopted you, or perhaps a blood parent and a step-parent. You have other things in common, too. You are, after all, part of the famous Millennial Generation of 50 million or so 18 to 29 year-olds, the first generation to come of age in the new millennium. A recently released survey from the Pew Research Center reveals a most impressive profile: you are reported to be confident, connected, progressive, upbeat, and family-oriented.

The majority of you rate being a good parent (52%) and having a successful marriage (30%) as among the most important things for your own lives, far above having a high-paying career (15%). Hang on to those views; you may need them since in your cohort of 18 to 29 year olds, a record 37% of you are unemployed. This is owing in large part to the economic downturn. Also, many of you have barely begun looking, or else you plan, like many older millennials, to go on to graduate study. A fascinating thing about your group is that despite the recession, nine in ten of you are upbeat about meeting your financial goals. You are also very self-expressive. Three quarters of you have created a profile on Facebook or another social networking site. (By comparison, less than a third of your parents, mostly Baby Boomers aged 46 to 64, have such a site. Of the 65 and over age group called the Silent Generation -- my group, if you must know -- only 6% have a Facebook-like site. I am among them, but I admit that my Gen X son helped me set it up. (I can’t resist pointing out, too, that while I am a member of the Silent Generation, you are the ones who saw to it I had a microphone this morning. Thank you.)

OK, what else about you? One fifth of you posted a video of yourself online. Forty percent of you report having at least one tattoo, although two-thirds say the tattoos are hidden under your clothing. A quarter of you report a piercing in a place other than an earlobe – 6 times the number of your parents who admit to tattoos and piercings. (I hope that at your family festivities later on today, I am not inviting a rash of unreasonable searches.)

On a more serious note, as a historian of women and of the family, I am fascinated by the extent to which your views as millennial women now converge with those of your male counterparts on a multitude of topics, including politics, religion, race, sexuality, and more. This owes much to the fact that unlike older generations, the daily experiences of young women and men are not only more similar than ever at each stage of the life cycle, but often more positive than those of their elders. For example, in education, you millennials, women and men alike, are well on your way to being the most educated generation in America’s history. Women came to equal and then surpass men in acquiring bachelors’ degrees in the 1980s, and this year, 2010, the millennial women just ahead of you will likely surpass men in overall numbers earning post-graduate degrees as well, although they still lag behind men in the areas of business, science and engineering.

Both your own and your parents’ generations now overwhelmingly approve people of different races marrying – 95 percent of you compared to 86 percent of your parents. On more controversial issues, you are consistently more (fill in the blank here with one of these terms: accepting, tolerant, liberal or wacko-extremist) than your
parents. For example 88 percent of you approve of people living together without getting married as compared to 56 percent of your Baby Boomer parents. Close to eighty percent of you approve of mothers of young children working outside the home, compared to just over 60 percent of your parents. And almost two thirds of you approve of gay couples raising children, while under half of your parents do. While the over 65 Silent Generation is even more disapproving on most of these issues, even they (or we, I should say) approve of people of different races marrying one another by nearly 75 percent.

This is part of the wider evidence for what is now recognized as not just a national but a global shift toward greater equality between the sexes in many arenas, along with more progressive sentiments among the new generations of millennials everywhere. We haven’t sorted out all the implications, but we are starting to recognize that what is happening to us as a species is that we are slowly but surely coming to the end of what for thousands of years has been women’s universal status as “the second sex.” This is a huge event whose importance is still obscured because we don’t realize how long it has been underway. That is, we still imagine that this shift toward equality began only a few decades ago, with the women’s movement of your mothers’ generation. But it now appears that the shift has been underway for at least five hundred years, and was likely an unintended effect of a change in families and in marriage patterns. Prior to the shift, most people lived in multi-family households -- where early marriage for women is the rule, and where households are governed by generations of resident males. After the shift, the dominant family pattern became nuclear, women married later, and households were run by the only two resident adults, one of whom is a woman.

Without going into depressing detail on your graduation day, suffice it to say that if members of the more traditional multi-generation households are asked to answer the question I am asking you today, namely “who belongs in your family?”, their likely answer would be “We men, the fathers and sons who remain lifelong in our birth households and are heirs to the family name and property.” The imported wives and daughters-in-law of these men also belong, but would come in a distant second. In these families, moreover, actual blood daughters count even less then the imported brides, since they are sent away from their natal households at puberty or before, and their value is reckoned chiefly in providing heirs for other peoples’ families. What is more, in these traditional households, daughters typically have no further contact with their natal families once their marriages are arranged. By contrast, later marriage for women, and the innovation of a brand new household with most new marriages, meant that adult women and men, rather than having arranged marriages, typically met one another while working as single farm servants, were partners in creating their new households, and were freer to make up much as they went along -- which is just what they did.

For you, then, we can see already some of the broad outlines of who belongs in your future family households. We know that especially as college graduates, you are likely to keep postponing marriage even further, though most of you will finally marry some time between your late twenties and mid-to-late thirties. Signs are already out there, by the way, that more of you women, though still a small minority, will likely be using your new professional status, as men have long done, to snag younger partners. If
you marry now, assuming you are heterosexual -- and probably soon enough if you are gay and want to marry -- you will not only get to choose your partner, here and in many other countries, but if things don’t pan out you will have a legal right to leave the marriage. What is more, as a woman, you can now more surely control both whether and when you become a mother. You must surely have seen all the stories marking May 9 – Mothers’ Day a week ago Sunday -- as the fiftieth anniversary of our government’s approval of the Pill. Think of how amazing it is that only in the past fifty years -- just yesterday in the thousands of years of recorded human history -- women (with or without a partner’s consent) have had foolproof means to control their fertility.

It is true that even without the Pill, women had learned a thing or two about preventing conception. Between 1800 and 1900, for example, as children in an increasingly urban world became more of a financial liability than an asset to households, the number of children born to the typical American woman declined from seven to 3.5, and demographers tell us women led the way. But the Pill, used properly, offers total certainty, and thus a new ability to plan for careers, not just jobs, without postponing sex. Ever more women began applying to law, medical, and business school. The revived feminist movement was important, too; but the Pill meant that professional schools and employers lost what had served as a convenient excuse for closing their ranks to women.

So, who belongs in your future families? More children who are planned is one answer. Another, though, is even more first-born children whose mothers are in their late thirties and forties. This is scary, since that model already translates now into too many couples who, despite new fertility clinics, discover too late they are unable to conceive. So young couples who want children need to ensure upfront that their future workplaces are responsive to family needs. For now, ask your prospective employers lots of tough questions, learn which ones are truly family-friendly, and which only say they are.

The culture wars over contraception lurch on, as you know. But contemplate, if you will, the scenes as well as the silences between mothers and their teenage daughters after May, 1960, when the Food and Drug Administration first gave the green light to those little white pills. I and most of my classmates then were just 19 years old and in college. I had already decided on the man I wanted to marry -- some day, that is. When I told my mother that we didn’t plan to marry any time soon, since I was going to grad school and so was my boyfriend -- but at different schools -- she was a wreck. A year later I broke the news that the boyfriend was going to study in England. Then the next year I got a fellowship and left for France, assuring my parents that we still planned to marry when we returned the next year. Mother said little to me, but an aunt told me later that mother thought, as people put it so colorfully back then, that I was going to be one of those brides who was “left standing at the altar.”

Mom and I never discussed whether the Pill was in the picture, and after all these years, my dears, I am not about to do so with you either. But I can tell you that in 1966 when my fiancé and I returned from Europe, the wedding plans had long since been out of our hands. Mother, I soon learned, had already bought my wedding dress. I was 25, which was old for a bride then. To be sure, clashes over the Pill still go on, publicly and behind closed doors, but mothers and daughters now are on the same side of the historical
divide on this issue, since daughters come of age these days in families where many mothers have been using the pill for years. (For a great snapshot of the range of current views, I urge you all to look at the scores of letters in response to Gail Collins May 8th column in the N.Y.Times on the Pill entitled: “What Every Girl Should Know.”)

Shared perspectives on the Pill are just one example, but a big one, helping to explain why mothers and daughters get along better these days, and why even though they still find things to fight about, relationships overall have improved greatly. This is a topic I want to touch upon in some final thoughts about who belongs in your family. Long before the survey analysts started taking your pulse as the famous millennial generation, I noticed as a professor and then as dean here at Douglass that my students got along way better with their parents than my generation had with ours. I taught some of your older sisters, and even a couple of your mothers. I was astonished to be regularly invited to students’ parties, and even more astonished to be introduced there to parents, who were truly welcome guests at those parties. In my own high school and college days parents were not really welcome at our parties. Though we put up with them hiding out upstairs as “chaperones”, we would not have dreamed, for example, of asking to move back home after college if we could possibly avoid it. Remember, the popular motto of the rising Baby Boomers was soon to be “Don’t trust anyone over thirty!” Today in these recessionary times one in eight of you will likely live with parents sometime in your twenties. And as we know from the surveys, such arrangements will work because you and your parents have got along better for years, are less divided, and respect one another more than earlier generations. This is not just good news for families. It is hope for our fractured political and social institutions, not to mention for the future of the world.

In fact, the penny dropped as I thought about the evolution of family households. These have shifted from places where even blood daughters do not truly “belong” to places where, owing to parents’ new partnership marriages, daughters slowly came to be treated as ever more equal to sons as they grew up. The name-calling and other bad behavior we are seeing in the public arena these days is thus not the “new normal” at all. It is instead better seen as a kind of last gasp from a minority of men from my Silent Generation as well as some older Boomers, who need to get beyond their anxiety attacks over what they see as uppity behavior from women and people of color. At the same time, we are happily seeing many more men of good will, bless them -- including your fathers -- who recognize that the appearance of these newcomers on their turf is long overdue. They agree with former Congresswoman Bella Abzug, who used to say that a woman’s place is not only in the home but in the House, and in the Senate, and wherever else she wants to be. To put it another way, the family has led once again -- just as in the shift from multiple households headed by fathers and sons to partnership households -- in modeling the behaviors of gender and racial equality and fairness that are now making their way into the public arena. All the attention to the acting out of a small minority played up by the media shouldn’t discourage you from stepping out. You are the future.

And now that you have already got so much right by welcoming ever widening numbers of new arrivals into your families and communities, including your sisters here at Douglass and the sisters and brothers next door at Cook and across town, you can
expand these leadership skills of yours, for that is what they are, to new arenas. You can welcome ever more strangers into your family circle, here in New Jersey and around the globe. Remember, you already have a documented history of doing this, and well.

**So who belongs in your family?**

You could do worse than to start by making it clear to your elected representatives that you want to get involved but that your generation is put off by the idiotic name-calling that passes for political discourse these days. They will listen, not least because they know that by 2020, when all the millennials born before 2000 have reached voting age, you will constitute 90 million people, or just under 40 percent of all eligible voters. This is a big deal. Your generation can spell an end to the counterproductive, “take no prisoners” style that has marked our politics for too long, and you can start now by flashing your trademark brand of decency, compromise, and optimism, honed within your family households. Consider this. When he decided last February not to run for another term, Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana cited the current rudeness and dysfunction in Washington as a main reason. He grew up there, he said, during a different time when his dad, Senator Birch Bayh, often invited both his Republican and Democrat colleagues, who were stranded in the nation’s capital on weekends, to their home for family dinners. Bayh noted that it is hard for people, even of sharply differing views, to engage in name-calling after they have shared a meal in a family setting. Such customs have gone out of style, but you can bring them back.

Changing the tone of the discourse, however, is only the beginning. What now seems possible is that the family, as an institution that initially modeled partnership households that helped women and men imagine a new world of gender and racial equality, has now, gone one better. With your generation, it has succeeded in modeling the vision of a true global family that goes beyond mere rhetoric, and encourages you to create new ways to realize both a sustainable and peaceful world. More than any group in the mix now -- and despite as well as because of your youth -- you are a huge potential force for positive change.

Given what we now know about you millennials, I think more than ever that the tough and spirited Bella Abzug was so right about you. Back in 1997, shortly before she died, Congresswoman Abzug predicted that the 21st century was going to be the women’s century -- with women finally gaining equality with men -- as well as being the century in which, in her words, “young people are going to take the lead.”

I congratulate all of you, and celebrate the ever widening circles of your families on this happy day. We here at Douglass send you out with our pride, our confidence, our joy and our love.