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***All Talk, No Walk: The  
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Family Politics***

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# *All Talk, No Walk: The Dissonance In Utah's Family Politics*

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The conservative, heavily Mormon community of the City of North Salt Lake recently considered a resolution, a “vision” statement of sorts, in support of the natural family. It was discussed and rejected soundly. Perhaps there was disagreement over the exact text, but in such councils legislative language is always malleable. There is simply no shading it – a community that would otherwise and unhesitatingly consider itself “pro-family” aggressively chose not to identify with the ideals of the natural family.

What is it about the reality of imperfect families that seems to paralyze our abilities as responsible citizens to uphold ideal family structures – family structures clearly shown through eons of experience and mountains of empirical research to be the safest, healthiest, happiest, most prosperous life, not to mention the most beneficial social experience for the common good of society?

Clearly, there is a dissonance in most of our lives between what we believe and how we live. No need to call it hypocrisy, just call it being human. Even still, amidst our conflicted psyches, we manage to persevere on a course set for our better selves. For instance, just because we sometimes lie does not mean that we endorse or even encourage lying. Or just because we may be alcoholic or drug addicted doesn't mean we want others to be. We want to be our better selves and we want the same for others.

So what is it about a serious public discussion regarding families that turns these better sentiments on their heads? All of a sudden this same mindful patience and tolerance that we afford our own shortcomings, and our dutiful expectations for ourselves and others, seems to vanish into thin air. All of a sudden the less-than-ideal becomes our standard.

Define the family? You must be joking. What an insult! How judgmental! But what if defining the family, like defining traffic lanes, made our community a safer, more ordered, and inevitably freer, place to live? In fact, a driving analogy is a great one to punctuate what should be obvious. Reasonable people can discern that placing both hands on the steering wheel and paying attention to the road is the safest and, indeed, the best way to drive. The reality is that most people don't do that. We drive with one hand on the wheel, talking on the cell phone, listening to the radio, reading billboards, etc. We have reckless driving laws. We get it – these sorts of good-driving expectations are universally accepted and appreciated.

But such careful attention to the family in public policy is not. The benefits to accepting and appreciating the best kinds of family structures are the same as recognizing good driving environments. Yes, there are all sorts of family structures these days. But to say that one is better than the other is no more judgmental in public policy terms than it is to say that there is a best way to be an attentive and safe driver.

It is, however, inappropriately judgmental to call a family a “bad one” just as it would be to call even a reckless driver a bad driver. Maybe that driver just had a bad day; maybe that family is just going through some hard times. By definition, public policy debates are public matters, not private ones, and these conversations require discernment, not judgment, in serving the public interest.

To recognize that married couples get divorced is no justification, in and of itself, for them to defend no-fault divorce laws. To recognize that two men or two women live as if in marriage is no justification for legalizing homosexual marriages. To say that single parents exist is no justification to ignore the private and public benefits of two-parent families.

What is it about family issues that bring out the selfish worst in people? The answer seems to be that we cannot separate our less-than-perfect family experiences from our societal obligations to recognize healthy experiences and to appropriately acknowledge and encourage them when we see them. When it comes to public policy there are measurements and standards that create safer and better societies. To point them out is not judgmental. It is a public service. That goes for family policy as much as it does for the rules of safe driving.

Perhaps the City of North Salt Lake simply did not understand how a local government could support the natural family. To start, we have to reflect on what it is that city and county governments do. What do they oversee and fund? Obviously, local governments oversee forms of business licensing and zoning regulations. So let’s begin there. The easiest example of what a city council could do to protect the family is not to allow sexually oriented businesses in its jurisdiction. Remember when some local citizens were ridiculed because of racy window ads from Victoria’s Secret at a local mall? Regardless of what is an appropriate response or not, such ridicule seemed knee-jerk when such concerns are valid for public debate.

Local governments also might be more considerate and accommodating of home-based businesses. Do local regulations prohibit or discourage a variety of home-based businesses? Zoning regulations, as well, might more appropriately allow a broad category of home-based businesses. For instance, my wife makes some very mean desserts but she could not create a dessert business out of her home for both licensing and zoning reasons, not to mention restrictive local health codes that could be changed. The self-reliance and productivity of the home economy remains a key part of promoting the natural family. Especially in this day and age of regressive “smart growth” planning, something like allowing food-producing animals on properties is drastically coming to an end through local edicts. That could be looked at.

City and county budgets could be reviewed line item by item to see what we are funding and see if we are doing anything that families should be doing for themselves. And then that funding should cease for those purposes. Keeping our cities safe for families is another area where local governments could protect the peace and stability of the natural family. Are child molesters really accounted for in our cities? Are the streets safe for children to play in their own yards or in walking to school?

Beyond these obvious things, we should not underestimate the power of a local city or county council to make a “statement” about the natural family, or underestimate their opportunity to influence the thoughts of other locally-elected bodies, like a school board. Admittedly, but for wrong-headed reasons, we acknowledge that there is great reluctance for one local body to inject itself into the business of another. But wouldn't it be nice if a city council took more of an interest in, say, a school

board's decision to do this or that that might be offensive to family values? A "statement" can simply set the tone for a community and could be used to promote residential and economic development. Families spend lots of money locally (especially at grocery stores ... where, by the way, a city, like Cedar Hills, could chose to look at banning liquor sales!). A city could actually advertise itself as family-friendly and compete for economic development with other Utah city's for the title.

The problem with passing a resolution favoring the natural family has nothing to do with its practicality. It makes perfect sense in a number of ways. The problem remains that, when it comes to family issues, most Utahns prefer to talk the talk, but not walk the walk. And this dissonance occurs primarily because of one of the great ironies of the modern era – while critics of family policy initiatives claim that we should mind our own business, they delight in the offensive and selfish intrusion of projecting the bad experiences of their lives onto others. You can almost hear the terse reprimand of a divorced parent counseling a young adult, “Now sweetie, you should really wait to get married. You don't want to do it so young. Look what happened to me!” Misery loves company. Meanwhile, communities suffer from this prejudiced and selfish narrow-mindedness.