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The Iron Connection between the Disintegration of Marriage, Educational Failure and Poverty

Before beginning, permit me three caveats that I always try to make clear whenever talking about the exceedingly sensitive and potentially hurtful subjects I'll be addressing this afternoon. And please accept great thanks to Chairman Gregory Gray and the Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota for this invitation.

First, when talking about the importance of re-institutionalizing marriage, particularly in inner-cities, the *only* kind I've ever advocated are healthy, non-violent, low-conflict, equal regard marriages.

Second, in no way is my intention to single out or gang up on single moms, as I've always sought to make it clear that I respect and empathize with the very large

number of unmarried women who are, in fact, raising their children successfully, even heroically, under often very hard circumstances. I also always try to acknowledge that life is inescapably messy. I'm quick to point out, for instance, that my wife and I are each in our second (and last) marriage (not that she likes the locution). She was a single mom for a long time after her divorce and before we met. My three stepsons have turned out great despite it all. You get the idea.

And third, even though fatherlessness increases the odds against children doing well, it does not inevitably consign them to troubled lives. Many kids growing up with only one parent at home (or in other "nontraditional" arrangements) are doing very well, while many other kids, growing up with both their biological parents are not doing well at all. But in the main – and the point is central – growing up without both a father and mother at home, especially in tough neighborhoods, invites trouble.

With such cautions in place, let me speed up and simultaneously sum up my argument as quickly and as directly as I can.

Even under the best of societal circumstances, and putting aside central matters such as defining or calculating what is meant by poverty in the first place, I don't believe for a moment that Minnesota or any other state – no matter how

compassionate and blessed – can "end" poverty, no matter how many years are allotted for the job. The complexities and vagaries of human nature, if none other, preclude the possibility.

But if eradicating poverty under ideal circumstances is unrealistic, what can be said about the possibility of doing so under terrible circumstances? More precisely, is ending poverty the least bit conceivable as long as immense numbers of households in Minnesota and in the Twin Cities especially are led by single parents – both men and women, but overwhelmingly the latter – who are poorly educated, with few job skills, weak job histories, and who are understandably preoccupied with raising young children alone or nearly so? I'm afraid it's not the least bit possible.

Some numbers.

- For the nation as a whole, the National Center for Health Statistics reported that the non-marital birth rate in 2005 was 36.8 percent.

- Locally, Hennepin County's Health Protection Assessment team reported that the non-marital birth rate for the city of Minneapolis, again in 2005, was 43.6 percent.

- Broken down by group, that same Hennepin County study, once more for 2005, reported these additional out-of-wedlock birth rates: "White not Hispanic," 20.8 percent; "Asian not Hispanic," 30.7 percent; "Hispanic/Latina," 57.9 percent; "Black/African American not Hispanic," 86.6 percent; and "American Indian not Hispanic," 89.4 percent.

Granted, bringing a child into this world outside of marriage does not necessarily mean that biological fathers are uninvolved; or that second (or even third) wage earners aren't in "single-parent" households; or that some number of women do not eventually marry, be their husband the birth father of one or more of her children or a stepfather. Yet even so, especially when compounded by the fact that the United States may have the highest divorce rate in the industrial world, ending poverty, simply and sadly, is not fathomable given the near-evaporation of marriage in large swaths of Minnesota and the nation. Somehow, marriage as an institution, particularly in inner cities, must be revived. And no, I have no adequate idea how to make this happen other than to hope that someday soon, enough people figuratively grab their heads and say, "My God, we simply can't continue doing this anymore."

Before offering a brief word about education, I suspect I need to offer one more caveat to the three at the start. Just about everything I've already said is moot if the commission's conception of ending poverty entails simply giving everyone enough cash and other governmental benefits to do the trick – no matter how able-bodied recipients may be and regardless of whether they participate in the paid workforce or not. Yes, this discredited type of dependency-provoking welfare could eliminate one kind of poverty, but it would cause and exacerbate others, both for individuals and the commonweal, and I trust it's not what commission members have in mind.

A similar argument can be made about education as about marriage.

Returning to Minnesota's biggest city, the Minneapolis school district itself, several years ago, in conjunction with the Minneapolis Foundation and the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, released the following data in regards to four-year graduation rates from the city's public high schools for the Class of 2000: 58 percent for white students; 31 percent for black and Hispanic students; and 15 percent for American Indian students. Even if we assume that graduation rates in Minneapolis public schools have improved somewhat since the start of the decade; even if we assume that every single kid actually graduated a year later in 2001 or sometime afterwards from a high school someplace else or earned a

G.E.D. (they didn't); and even if we assume that everyone who did graduate on time back then could read, compute, and write adequately (they couldn't), is it conceivable that everyone in the cohort is academically and vocationally equipped to escape poverty? One more time, I'm afraid there's not the smallest chance.

As opposed to a general dearth of ideas for fixing marriage, we're awash in ideas for fixing what bedevils us educationally. I will propose just one: affording all children, but especially low-income boys and girls, viable opportunities to attend schools that work best for them, be those schools public or private, religious or not. Yes, the reference here is to vouchers.

In the interest of time, and the fact that I very much welcome your questions, let me conclude with just one more finding. Paul Peterson is the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government and Director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard. For good measure, he also, quite likely, is the only living member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Education to have grown up in Chippewa County. He said this about full-fledged school choice programs to an American Experiment audience in March: "In Milwaukee, where students with vouchers are going to private schools, 80 to 90 percent are graduating from high school. In the public schools and the selective, privileged magnet schools in Milwaukee, the graduation rate is only 50 to 60-

percent. Thus, the biggest impact creating a private educational experience for minorities comes in the later years, and it has to do with keeping those kids in an educational environment that sustains them through to graduation."

There is hardly anything I've said this afternoon that's easy talk about, listen to, or do something effectively about. But hardly anything will get more than marginally better when it comes to helping fellow citizens in greatest need unless we find the courage and grace to grapple with these painfully hard issues head on.