

## **From FAMILY WEALTH REPORT**

# Families first: Tradition in a multicultural world

Charles Lowenhaupt - 27 September 2007

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I met a man in India, an astute observer of the cultural effects of private wealth, who held that the custom of educating children in the U.S. posed a threat to the Indian family. Especially pernicious, in his view, was the tendency of semi-Americanized young Indians to fall in love with people outside their religion or beneath their social standing.

My acquaintance told of a young woman from an Indian community with a strict and exclusive tradition of arranged marriage. As a student in Boston, she fell in love with a young man. He was from her hometown in India -- but not from her *community*, making him, for her at least, "unsuitable" marriage material. The two got married anyway. Her father reacted by disowning the young woman and banishing her from all family activities and associations.

### **Melding pot**

Is this just a tale of modern India? Not if you go by the experiences of some of my own friends. One is a Malaysian Muslim who married a Buddhist Chinese three decades ago. They still feel repercussions from both communities. Another is an African American who married a Caucasian some twenty years back. They're still going strong, but they're frequently labeled as a "mixed" couple. And I hear similar stories of people from all over who marry outside their communities.

Montagues and Capulets are as apt to pop up in Mumbai as in Renaissance Verona -- and, it would seem, everywhere else. A byproduct of globalism is the intercultural relationship. Cultures and races are melding. I recently met an Australian of Lebanese extraction who was taking 180 friends to his wedding, to an American, in Italy.

So what does any of this have to do with family wealth?

We hear a lot about family constitutions based on family culture and family values. Honoring the family legacy is encouraged and family bonding around shared values is cast as a universal good. Grandchildren are urged to sit at their grandparents' feet to hear stories of the family's history and accomplishments.

### **The cost of honor**

But is that always feasible? Take the case of my African-American friend; the one I mentioned a little earlier. The great grandfather of his Caucasian wife was, in the tradition of the time and place, brought up by his family's African American slaves. How then should my friend's go about preparing his children to sit on Granny's knee to hear stories about the slave girls and nursemaids who raised a family patriarch?

Should they share one side of their family's pride in and nostalgia for the antebellum South? What part should these youngsters have in preserving *this* family legacy?

Or take the Muslim father and Buddhist mother of three fine girls. Should Islamic tradition keep them from eating pork or going bareheaded? Should the children embrace a "family value system" that ostracizes them as a result of their father's choice to marry outside his faith and tradition?

In a multicultural world "family values" can be code for religious intolerance, for racial bias and for conflicting influences on children, who can become the objects of demonic fights for cultural control. Caught in such whirlwinds, these children can lose all sense of love and security.

Counseling modern families calls for a recognition of multiculturalism. Just as we bend over backward to accommodate the Sharia-bound or socially responsible investor, so should we accommodate the multiracial and multicultural family by revising "text book" thinking about the strength and the foundation of "family values."

### **Loaded words**

Mission statements are often advocated for families that bundle, or are in the process of bundling, their wealth. These are unlikely to say simply, "Our mission is to make our wealth do whatever we want it to do."



Nor are they likely to espouse unconditional love. In such cases it seems somehow unsophisticated -- or at least insufficiently "rigorous" -- to sum things up by saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Direct and universal principles like these are likely to be viewed as too simple -- at least by the standards of the industry that has sprung up to help wealthy families formulate mission statements. Instead families are coaxed to conjure with concepts like "responsibility" and "stewardship" to the point, often, that there's little room left for true diversity.

Some families, following their traditions, give women no place at the family governance table -- with the effect that there *is* no real governance, at least not for half the family. If the mission statement refers to God or to a particular religion, what happens to the atheist or to the member of an outside faith -- the Zoroastrian, say -- who marries into the family?

So as we counsel families, we should be sensitive to the needs of individual family members in the context of multiculturalism. We have to maintain cultural neutrality, allowing our advice to encourage the inclusion of individual needs, wants and cultures.

We also have to recognize areas where differences, whether stemming from culture, personality, or sensitivity, have the potential to prevent the family's governance

structures from working. We must be prepared to advise families to unbundle their wealth (if not other ties) when family "values" result in the exclusion of certain members -- whether they're related by blood or by marriage.

Long before matters come to a crisis, however, we can help our clients understand that a family can be multicultural and that family members of different backgrounds can love one another and thrive without necessarily sharing one another's values. - FWR

*The illustration for this column is a detail from a Japanese woodblock print in the Charles A. Lowenhaupt Collection.*

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