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## The Importance of Family

*“Mr. Kurtz’s methods had ruined the district.”*

-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

The word “family” can be heard in casual conversations across the globe, but everyone seems to have a very different definition of this word. For example, the first entry for the word “family” on [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) states, “a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head” (“Family”). Although I would consider this definition accurate for describing “immediate family,” my definition of “family” is much broader. Being of Greek heritage, I have an extensive group of people that I include as my family. I have grandparents, aunts, uncles, first cousins, distant cousins, relatives in Greece that I have barely talked to, and many other blood lines, as well as some very close friends, who would also fall into this category. These people are all a part of my family because they constitute my safety net. I know that all these people would be willing to help me in any situation I may find myself in and that I can always seek their advice. On the other hand, several works of literature and modern day examples illustrate that people who are lacking a similar type of family network tend to lose track of commonly accepted morals, or, in other words, the ability to distinguish right from wrong.

One of the best literary examples to demonstrate this concept of lost morals is the character of William Kurtz, the centerpiece of Joseph Conrad’s book entitled *Heart of Darkness*. At the end of the story, when Marlow goes to visit Kurtz’s Intended, she states, “of all [Kurtz’s] promise, and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart, nothing remains—

nothing but a memory” (Conrad 102). Since The Intended was Kurtz’s future wife, it is safe to assume that she knew him quite well. Therefore, when she remembers aspects of Kurtz’s character, such as his “noble heart,” the reader can infer Kurtz used to be a man of values. However, when Kurtz is ripped away from his family, he becomes a different person. As Marlow retells his story of the Congo to the passengers aboard the *Nellie*, he recalls what happened to Kurtz when he says:

But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. (Conrad 84)

This quotation reveals that it is Kurtz’s solitude that leads to his downfall. When he is in the jungle, he is overcome with urges to take control, and with no family network around to criticize his actions and help guide him to the right decisions, he resorts to instincts that are driven purely by self-gratification. His innate instincts cause him to digress from his “civilized” state into something “primal,” and he loses his morality along the way.

As a person moves away from literature and into the real world, it becomes easier to see why people need a family to acquire the morals common throughout society. To begin with, Sean Brotherson, a Family Science Specialist for the North Dakota State University Extension Service, has noted that “by the time a child is 3 years old, a baby’s brain has formed about 1,000 trillion connections—about twice as many as adults have” (Brotherson). The research also shows that at around the age of 11, a person begins to get rid of the connections in the brain that he or she is not using (Brotherson). Therefore, childhood is the best time for learning. One concept that

can be easily learned during this time is morality, but children without solid families have no one to teach them these values. Consequently, they grow up getting used to making decisions solely to survive and with a disregard for other people. Although they can possibly acquire these values later in life, it is often much more difficult (Brotherson). For this reason, it is extremely important to have a supportive family during childhood because without some type of guidance, a child can very easily take a dark turn in life.

An example of children straying towards darkness comes from examining street gangs. Ivan Congreve, manager of a London lodge that provides homeless boys with a place to stay, states, “All of our guys are from a broken family of one sort or another and that leads them into gangs” (Moore-Bridger). The same holds true in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, where Detective Christopher Orozco describes that if people’s families would just give their children some proper care, it could steer the children away from gangs: “I believe that the best thing parents can do is not keep their children locked in their rooms, but rather talk to them,” and he points out that the parents should acknowledge what are acceptable actions for their children (Monitz). When kids have no family to teach them these lessons, they turn to the streets for support. Sam Marolo, Superintendent of the Hazleton area, attributes this search for acceptance to the fact that many of the kids are looking for the attention they have been deprived of at home (Monitz). Since the majority of the people in these groups have similar backgrounds of growing up alone, they try to set up their own support network within a gang. Congreve describes this protective strategy by stating, “[Gang members] are accepted, looked after and respected in ways they don’t feel they get from their family” (Moore-Bridger). Once the gang is established, one of its primary concerns is survival, so the gang tends to make decisions based on basic instincts that lead the members to take part in primitive actions such as group violence and murder. The simple

element of love in their homes early on may have kept these kids on track and caused them to realize the foolishness of these activities.

Even if a person did have a family growing up to teach him or her various values of life, those morals can easily be abandoned as soon as the person is isolated from family. For instance, when people go into prison, they enter a completely different world. The morals they may have abided by on the outside no longer take precedence in prison. Everyone resorts to the survival mentality and tries to live based on primordial instincts. Once again, since there is no one there to support the individuals, they digress into a type of primitive society. One of the most common actions associated with prison is male rape. It has been noted, though, that this rape “doesn’t have to do with homosexuality or even rape, but of dominance over other inmates” (Thompson). When the inmates find themselves alone, they try to establish power over the others, much like Kurtz does in *Heart of Darkness*. This power then drives them to disregard other previously held values and leads to more and more violence within the jail cells. Some people may claim that people in prison lacked morals in the first place, which is why they are behind bars. However, according to Judge John Curran, a man with forty years of experience in criminal justice, weak family systems are at the root of most crimes he has seen (“Judge”). Therefore, the majority of prisoners never had the chance to learn the morals during their childhood, and the ones that did have family support early on easily lose sight of everything when survival is their number one concern.

These previous examples highlight how survival can cause people to lose a moral center, but there is one other main factor: freedom. When people feel free from society, they will make choices that are influenced by self-gratification. This freedom is what motivated Kurtz to take control of the natives of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*, but the effect of this freedom can more

readily be observed in college freshmen. Every year, thousands of students pack their bags in August and travel to universities hours away from their homes. Sometimes their parents will help them move in, but once the parents leave campus, the party begins—no more curfews, no more being grounded, and no more rules in general. Back home, when the students' families are around to help guide them, the students would generally not skip class or engage in behaviors their parents would not approve of for two reasons: first, they know that these actions are not the right thing to do, and, second, they fear the consequences should their parents find out. When students do not have to worry about the repercussions of their actions, however, the sense that they can do whatever they want overpowers them. To make matters worse, Craig Bennett, a graduate student conducting research at Dartmouth College, reports, ““The brain of an 18-year-old college freshman is still far from resembling the brain of someone in their mid-twenties” (“Brain”). Therefore, these young adults are not fully matured and can easily slip into learning bad habits. Many of these people start skipping classes and developing problems with both drugs and alcohol during their first year of college. They lose track of the person they used to be simply because their family is not there to help shape them and give input towards their decisions.

Curiously, these complications do not only apply to college bound students; they can also be seen in the lives of celebrities. Most stars live normal lives up until they become famous, and then they become prone to making bad decisions. Those they travel with cannot provide the same type of support as a family, and the celebrities get enough money to do what they please. When these two factors are combined, they can have disastrous effects. For example, Britney Spears, a woman who first appeared as a child star and something of a role model for young girls, began engaging in erratic behavior once she achieved fame and relative freedom from societal rules. A

few years ago, she became an item on televisions across America because of her irrational activities, such as shaving her head bald. Although many people believed this act was a publicity-stunt, it was actually a real problem brought about by the absence of her family. Spears was raised as a girl with religious and family values, but quickly dismissed these morals when she became a star. As she made her transition into stardom, she traded in her traditional clothes for scandalous outfits, and as the years went on, she became increasingly involved with drugs and alcohol. It was in 2007 that Spears began losing herself completely and checked herself into rehab. In the months before her decision to go to Eric Clapton's Crossroads Centre, with no close contact with her family to provide support, her substance abuse had driven her to do things such as publically expose her private parts and collapse during a New Year's Eve party, things she would not have done had she not felt the freedoms of being famous ("Reports"). Spears's case is different, though. Her family was still there to help her in her time of need. They saw that Spears was deteriorating as a person, and they knew they had to step in. According to Felicia Culotta, Britney's close friend and assistant for ten years, "WE (as in [Britney's] family and nearest and dearest—ALL of whom are not on the payroll anymore!!) are doing EVERYTHING in our power to get help for Britney" ("Reports"). With her family's support, Spears was able to seek treatment for her problems and reestablish a balanced lifestyle.

It is clear that family helps people such as Spears keep their morals in check, but when this sense of family is lost, it is very easy to slip into a pattern of unacceptable behaviors. Even with this knowledge, we continue to hear more and more stories about children being abandoned and raised on the streets on the news. For this reason, society as a whole should realize the positive impact of close-knit relationships, especially during childhood, and work to restore the classic concept of a family. If most people are able to establish and maintain a family structure,

the portions of the population that are digressing into a “primitive” state may be able to turn themselves around, which may ultimately help society to progress and perhaps even flourish in the future.

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