

**Viva the Vital**

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## **Reinventing the Family**

*By James A. Bacon*

It was a big story in the gossip journals last November: Marian Robinson, Michelle Obama's 71-year-old mother, was moving into the White House with the first family. It turns out that both mom and dad, the first lady and the president, expected to have such full schedules that they wouldn't have time to do the kinds of things for 10-year-old Malia and seven-year-old Sasha that normal parents do – like schlep them off to school, soccer practice and sleepovers with their friends. Michelle reportedly “begged” her mother to move from her home in Chicago to help out.

Checking into the White House as the first black president is not the only precedent that Barack Obama is likely to set. He'll be in the vanguard of the changing American family structure, too. After years of atomization – households shrinking into ever smaller units – there are signs that households will start getting bigger again. And Baby Boomers, the quintessential “sandwich generation,” are leading the way. Between the Boomers' parents moving in and their grown-up children moving out, three-generational households are making a come-back.

The two-generation nuclear family – mom, dad and the kids – is still widely regarded as the ideal. But families have been going nuclear (sociologically speaking) for so long – the average number of people sharing a home was 4.5 in 1915, just over three in 1967 and 2.6 in 2006 – that any shift in direction would be momentous.

Americans have become so accustomed to the idea of the nuclear family that they regard it as the natural order of things. Of course, as anthropologists have amply documented, the nuclear family is an artifact of industrial civilization. Over the course of human history, family structures have displayed bewildering variety in where the newlyweds live (with the mother's family, the father's or on their own); the tracing of lineage (through the bride's family or the groom's); and the right of men to marry multiple wives, polygamy, or in rare instances, the right of women to marry multiple husbands, a practice known as polyandry. (Madonna, phone home!)

It should surprise no one, then, that the atomized American family does not represent the pinnacle of Western Civilization but one more in a long line of social experiments arising from a particular set of historical circumstances. One circumstance that propelled social change was the pill, which gave rise to the sexual revolution, which in turn gave rise to soaring divorce rates and millions of smaller, female-headed households. Another was the development of in vitro fertilization, which led to such novelties as anonymous, sperm-donor fathers and households led by Murphy Brown-like career women who wanted children but were too busy to bother with a husband.

But no social trend lasts forever. Today, individuals are agglomerating into new types of domestic units. Where “homosexuals” once lived along, or discretely as “roommates,” today’s gays are lobbying for the right to marry – and to have children. The Heather-has-two-mommies phenomenon is likely to spread, creating families of three individuals in place of households of only one or two.

There are many other reasons to believe that households will grow larger, such as the prolonged adolescence of the Millennial Generation (Gen Y). Whether young people simply refuse to grow up (the premise of the movie, “Failure to Launch”) or they’re so saddled by student loans and so stymied by the high cost of housing, many are deciding that living in their old room with the twin beds and study desk isn’t a bad alternative compared to poverty.

Meanwhile, members of the Silent Generation are resisting the idea of being shunted into impersonal nursing homes. Seniors want to stay connected with family and friends – and an increasing number of idle-aged families are accommodating their parents. Subdivision builders report a spike in demand for granny flats and other attached dwelling units for the grandparents. Baby Boomers are even more repelled than their elders by the prospect of living in “old folks homes.” After letting their adult Gen Y children back into their homes, they may well expect the Gen Ys to return the favor some day.

In another sign of the times, the Richmond Times-Dispatch wrote last year about Richmonders Susan Grady and Sharon McAbee, one of them widowed and one of them divorced, who set up house together. Did the two women comprise a “family”? Perhaps not. But, for sure, they were more than roommates. They lived together, shared expenses and provided emotional support in a stable, long-term friendship.

We don’t know if anyone has coined a name for that kind of household – the “amalgamated family,” perhaps? But one is needed. Such unconventional arrangements that fuse atomized households are fast becoming the norm.