

Good trends and memorable movements are rarely revolutionary in their earliest phases. Rather, they are more likely to emerge in the form of basic ideas gleaned from the chaff of larger distracting contexts. The greater the volume of our distraction and diversion, the less likely that useful re-directions will be heard.

In many ways, we are probably at a time when distractions are at their greatest (advertising remains at a fever pitch and a plethora of electronic gizmos compete for our attention); thus great ideas are less likely to be exposed and we are less likely to hear new and valuable messages. Further, the new voices and new ideas may be throttled by powerful and established entities who are threatened by any change. Even when new words are spoken—will they be noticed? Will journalistic entities be aware of evolutionary or revolutionary possibilities? The moment must be right...the movement must be special...and any enduring strength of a new idea may require the power of both public and private entities.

Such is the context of modern revolutions—of new and more effective approaches which, by their execution, supplant established situations and problems:

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He selected a sizeable audience of individuals with homogenous values. It was a place where specific policy pronouncements were not expected—the local press was in bed and the coastal mavens were over 1,500 miles away and, as is so customary, oblivious to Midwestern events.

It was the Annual Governor's Prayer Breakfast, a vaguely inclusive event known for four things—self-righteous and self congratulatory pronouncements; numerous general invocations to a diety; the maintenance of holier-than-thou political contacts (...and most likely, "group food" of questionable quality).

The Governor began to raise a few eyebrows as soon as everyone had a good start on their bacon and eggs. He launched into a rather depressing litany of State social service expenditures, and to all present, it sounded just like a not so extraordinary attack on that godless party not behind the podium. But instead of blaming the uninvited opposition, he recited the discouraging history and outlined the unabated future growth of costs to the taxpayers. He shared that he could so clearly see that the costs of school dropouts, teen pregnancies, local and state incarceration, child support enforcement, welfare payments, divorce and custody courts were highly interconnected problems. Then, as he shifted to compliment all present for their godly work, he was quick to add that the current problems were far beyond the scope and effectiveness of customary cures and voluntary efforts.

He had access to the data. He knew that Oklahoma's very high level of church attendance all seemed rather impotent when looking at the State's number one rating in the rate of incarceration for women. He pointed out that there was nothing holy or exemplary in any data regarding family and social factors in the State. But he wasn't preaching to blame. He was pointing out that things had to change. He most strongly suggested that the churches, cathedrals, and synagogues had far more to do than just marry couples and create families. The State government, specifically including himself, had far more to do in creating a climate for improvement.

He knew that most of his State's citizens proclaimed church membership and that only a handful had been married outside of a church---and right in front of him were hundreds of the State's clergy. He'd done his reading and he'd noted that higher divorce rates are tied to higher public expenditures for an entire variety of social maladies—anywhere in the world that you care to check. He knew that his State was far closer to the top than the bottom on this sad, sad pathology scale. They could feel the challenge coming, and all present awaited ideas for improvement. This truly was a "Come to Jesus" moment—a time for all present to rise to the challenge of doing what needed to be done about lowering the State's

divorce rate—and the sooner, the better. The Governor outlined his challenge, both to the ministers present, and to his employees all over the State.

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It's now five years later. Together, the State government, the clergy, and various non-profit groups set a goal of relationship education class availability in every county. Through the use of public and private funds, classes based on "what works in family relationships" are now presented in a variety of public meeting halls—from county extension offices to health departments, from church basements to welfare offices.

Couples (be they newly married, engaged, well-established, as well as those experiencing difficulties) are specifically invited through newspaper, television, and radio advertising. Single individuals are also eligible to come and learn how to make their relationships successful in these free classes. The cost of a marriage license is reduced dramatically for engaged couples who complete ten hours of relationship education class.

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I decided to attend such a weekend class, telephoning to make a reservation. A brochure was mailed to me, outlining the basic format and procedures. It was going to be a mostly lecture format, probably with some kind of workbook with accompanying video clips. At this site, they expected about fifteen couples.

The suburban strip mall conference room provided the rather expected format. A young man outlined the basics of the PREP workbook as he handed them out and reminded us to complete the enrollment forms (to qualify us for the marriage license discount completion certificate). PREP stands for prevention and relationship enhancement program. It's based on nearly twenty years of National Institutes of Mental Health research at the University of Denver. (The primary researchers weren't even mentioned though their findings and recommendations are readily available at prepinc.com)

Several basic themes were mentioned numerous times—ideas that can so easily be helpful in areas that are troublesome for many, many couples and families:

--Great couples can honor their differences and manage them well instead of expecting perfect compatibility with all of the related and elevating frustration when it's not achieved.

--Great couples honor their commitments, even in their "low" moments, remembering the value of maintaining the best possible relationship for themselves, their children, their society, and to their faith tradition (should they practice a faith belief).

--Great families pursue fun and friendship, and they are particularly skilled at "catching each other doing well."

--Great families have well understood and practiced "repair mechanisms" to correct the inevitable human errors and mistakes that disappoint others.

--Great couples practice "soft starts" in the addressing of the variety of difficulties and misunderstandings that occur in family life.

--Any couple can generate "danger signs" of escalation (minor misunderstanding moving to major difficulty); invalidation (disrespecting efforts and contributions of others and failing to give daily validations); negative interpretations (picking on the imperfect aspects while failing to note the positive tone in the contribution of others); and withdrawal or avoidance (that refusal to engage which can trigger very poor responses by others).

The results of this Statewide training effort to better prepare couples and families for a healthier society

with the benefits of reduced social interventions and expenses are not clear, as yet. Of course, the incarceration rate remains high. Poor marital relationship skills continue to bring families into divorce court. Welfare caseworkers continue to identify inadequate parents and attempt to make foster home placements that might be better for the children. But all of the couples I met left the training session with an uplifting confidence in their new-found knowledge—a confidence that any future relationship difficulty would be handled with greater skill. There are many people in Oklahoma who are thus expecting improved family outcomes for many people, near and far.

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Bravo to Frank A. Keating, the former Governor of Oklahoma for his political courage in challenging us all to maintain a much higher and better standard in our lives together.