

Books of Interest

More Lifeways, edited by Patti Smith and Signe Ekiund Schaefer. Hawthorn Press, 1997.

Reading through this new Lifeways book, it becomes evident that every decade needs its own Lifeways edition, and this one serves the 1990's quite well. There are articles on single parent families, on fathering, on death in the family, on international adoption, on being adopted, and much, much more. The original was used for years in parent study groups. This one can also be used in that way, and I can imagine that the conversations that will ensue will be warm, lively and wonderfully contemporary.

An important part of the book are the rich write-ups in the Introduction by Gudrun Davy and Bons Voors, the editors of the original *Lifeways* book. They speak of the forming of new "destiny groups" such as those which are formed to help nurse a person through the final weeks or months of life. In such a group individuals gather to help one another with all manner of life problems in the form of "support groups", but often they give more than simple support. They become the new family as the old forms of family fade and dissolve. Many of us have wondered what is the nature of the new Michaelic family, for it is clear that the Gabrielic family of the past with its emphasis on family insularity and blood bonds is not meeting the needs of many of today's adults or children. This Introduction and the chapters that follow give pointers for a future based on consciously chosen relations with strong destiny commitments. We no longer need to mourn the passing of the old family forms; we can rejoice that new forms are emerging that support the growth and development of each individual in the family, adults and children.

Ties that Stress: The New Family Imbalance by David Elkind. Harvard University Press, 1994.

In this book, David Elkind, well known as the author of *The Hurried Child*, and *Miseducation of the Child*, looks at the changing complexities of family life. He assesses the differences between the nuclear family of the past and today's postmodern family and sees a pendulum swing that needs to be balanced through what he calls the new vital family.

In describing the nuclear family, which reached its peak in the 1950's, he points out that its strong structure and boundaries provided a haven for children and adolescents. They knew where they were and who they were and could devote themselves to the arduous task of growing up. On the other hand, for the adults, the nuclear family did not always work so well. Tremendous sacrifices were called for, and there was often little sense of personal growth and development. Mothers stayed at home even if they were longing to pursue careers; fathers were obliged to be the sole breadwinners and sometimes felt enslaved by corporate life; divorce carried a strong social stigma and many couples also stayed together for the sake of the children, suffering through unpleasant and unhealthy relationships.

In the shift to the postmodern family, the pendulum swung the other way. Careers for both parents, divorce, single parent homes, or blended families with children from two or three marriages became quite normal. Elkind points out that dependence was a principle at work in the nuclear family while independence is at work in the postmodern family. This family structure serves the needs of the adults very well, for it gives them maximum opportunities for growth and development. He points out, however, that it does not serve the needs of the children as well. There is too much uncertainty and too little form. What is given in this review is a simplistic description of very complex family pictures and Elkind explores many shadings and nuances in his book.

In the final chapter he describes the new family, perhaps that of the future, which he calls the vital family. Here the principle of interdependence is at work, with a realization that family life and the raising of children requires a sense of community, both within the family and between the family and the larger

community. It embraces some of the best qualities of the nuclear family with its emphasis on dependence on one another and the postmodern family with its emphasis on independence. The description he gives contains elements similar to those Gudrun Davy points to when she speaks of “destiny groups” as a new form of family.

It Takes a Village by Hillary Clinton

Another book which carries these themes in a similar vein is Hillary Clinton's *It Takes a Village* (Simon and Schuster, 1996). It is written in a very personal and readable way, weaving her own experiences with those of others working on behalf of children. She explores many aspects of what David Elkind would call the interdependence between family and society. Her “village” consists of all the many layers that surround a child, like the nesting dolls made in Russia, and which includes “family, school, neighborhood, church, workplace, community, culture, economy, society, nation, and world.” At times she speaks with amazing clarity and force, for instance when describing the plight of children today:

“Everywhere we look children are under assault: from violence and neglect, from the breakup of families, from the temptations of alcohol, tobacco, sex and drug abuse, from greed, materialism and spiritual emptiness. These problems are no new, but in our time they have skyrocketed. Against this bleak backdrop, the struggle to raise strong children and to support families, emotionally as well as practically, has become more fierce.” (pg. 11)

These books point to the need to examine family life again and find ways to create healthy, viable families as we move towards the end of this century and towards the next. In times of uncertainty it is always tempting to turn around and head for the past. Instead we are being asked to go through the eye of a needle and evolve towards a new form that will meet the needs of contemporary families and especially of the children.

Note: Margret Meyerkort contacted us to say that her six volumes: *Spring, Summer, Winter, Fall, Gateways* and *Spindrift* will be released in a new edition, probably in the fall. We will keep you posted about this. Also *Child and Man*, the Waldorf publication from Great Britain published a special issue on the young child, entitled *Early Childhood, a Steiner Education Monograph*. To order or find out about local availability, write to Steiner Education, The Sprig, Ashdown Road, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5JX, England.