In her work-worn dress and rundown shoes, Brazilian elder Ella Borges carries herself with grace and the utmost dignity. As we sat on her bed in a ramshackle hut adjacent to a deserted villa in a busy neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, she spoke eloquently of her childhood. Ella, who is of Afro-Brazilian descent, was born in a faraway rural area, but when she turned ten years old, she was sent to the city. "My mother was ashamed of me," she admitted, "because my skin was so dark, much darker than hers or that of my sisters and brothers. She didn't want me around. I was sent to Rio to become a maid in a wealthy and distinguished family."

Ella took pride in the fact that her employers treated her well. They sent her to school and gave her all the advantages of a real daughter. When it came time for Ella to marry, they provided the young couple with a fine wedding and the furnishings for their home. "But I married a weak man," Ella explained. "He was swindled and lost all our money. He ran away in shame; I never heard of him again." Ella had to sell all her belongings to pay his debts. They had no children, and Ella never remarried.

Now, in her late sixties, Ella lives in an abandoned, rat-infested house. Here she is able to take in "anyone who needs a place to sleep": street children, battered women, or transient laborers. She gathers donations of food and clothes from local churches and manages somehow to provide for her guests. "Over the years," she said with a measure of pride and sadness, "I've raised sixteen children. They all call me Mother and come back from time to time to see me."

An impoverished, childless woman nearing seventy, Ella Borges gathers the needy around her and nurtures youngsters nobody else wants. Sixteen unrelated people call her Mother, and there is little doubt that her family will continue to expand.
Ella Borges offers security, support, and solace to needy people. In return she feels part of a caring group. Is this not a kind of family—a group of individuals who support and care for one another, bound by empathy and a sense of mutual responsibility? To be sure, each family is different. Families come in all sizes and combinations of old and young, male and female members. We witnessed that diversity in the preceding chapters. Permitted to look behind the curtain of family privacy, we found admirable families of all kinds, but also learned that the family is not always the secure place we wish it to be. When successful, families respect their individual members and nourish them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. At their worst they exploit, abuse, or abandon their own.

We have heard scores of family stories. From them arise suggestions for easing the multiple pressures on families in this period of profound transition. These pressures will not go away; they are here to stay, or to be replaced by others, perhaps even more daunting.

What can we learn from these families? How did or do they cope with the forces of change? And what is the role of public policy in managing the context in which families must function? What can we do, individually and as citizens, to require family-friendly public policies? And how do we hold our decision-makers accountable to the coming generations?

From our elders we heard about the profound changes they have witnessed. As relationships among generations and strict gender roles are transformed, shifts in authority and family decision-making reshape family interaction.

New egalitarian relationships within the family sometimes confuse elders, and they fret that the young are not as responsible as they once were. They worry about the quality of their late life: about health care, leisure, companionship. That worry is justified in a time when extended families are more and more rare, and when family work obligations leave no one to care for the elderly within the home. The question of society’s role in providing elder-friendly communities is becoming paramount as longevity increases.

As the twenty-first century began, women’s participation in democratic discourse within the home and society cut across all cultures and classes. The concept of women’s equality to men transformed women’s perception of themselves and their place in the community, nation, and world. Reaching from bourgeois mansions to nomadic tents, it is one of the most dynamic social forces of our time. Nearly everywhere, the status of today’s women is far better than that of their foremothers a century or half-century ago. Access to education and opportunities for salaried work, the capacity to plan pregnancies, and improvements in legal status concerning inheritance, property rights, marriage, divorce, and domestic violence have totally reshaped women’s lives.

The United Nations played a significant role in women’s advancement: the International Women’s Year (1975) and the UN Decade for Women
(1976–1985) that followed raised awareness about the unequal status of women and gave women the opportunity to participate in international forums where their rights were formulated. Governments were urged to examine laws and customs concerning women and to rescind or discourage those that barred women and girls from full participation in society. These gains have altered our way of life, to be sure, but much more remains to be done: millions of women remain voiceless and vulnerable due to legal inequality, traditions, or, in the extreme case of the Taliban in Afghanistan and to a lesser degree other religious institutions, to religious obscurantism. Today access to reproductive health care and family planning is part and parcel of women’s human rights, yet some patriarchal forces will go to dangerous lengths to control women’s bodies: the Vatican, for example, continues to condemn modern contraception and “has repeatedly maintained that its complete prohibition of condoms for the prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission—even among married couples—will not be lifted in the future and that only abstinence and fidelity in marriage will be the panacea of the pandemic.” Margaret Sanger, the American pioneer in family planning, once noted that “if women were not allowed the knowledge to control their own bodies, they would never be free.” Indeed. The resistance to reproductive choice and to women’s right to control their bodies represents the last gasp of patriarchal control.

Investments in accessible health care and family planning services, in girls’ education, and in women’s economic opportunities are necessary if all women are to live more healthy and productive lives. This may not happen, however, until such time as far more women are in the seats of power, members of the legislatures where laws are fashioned and the agencies where policies are implemented.

The economic and social transformation that has resulted in a shift in gender roles within the family and society at large is a cross-cultural reality. As women’s lives are reshaped by more access to education and public life, so, too, are those of men. The adjustment to these emerging roles is an ongoing process. There appears, for example, to be a shift in attitudes—and more than a little confusion—about the responsibilities and expectations that come with manhood. Many men retain a lingering ambivalence about women working outside the home, perceiving it as a threat to their authority. Some say it is a contributing factor to divorce and family breakdown. Others see it as an important contribution to family well-being and their wives’ personal enrichment. In any case, women’s participation in, and contribution to, the world economy is a reality and is clearly here to stay.

What is most disturbing is evidence that significant numbers of men—husbands and fathers—are walking away from family responsibilities. The fact that over 25 percent of the world’s households are headed by women
speaks clearly to this assumption, as do several of the interviews in this book. There appears to be little data on the factors resulting in these women-led households—on, say, the percentage of women who are widowed, divorced, abandoned, or left alone by men forced to seek work abroad. But the interviews herein too often testify to men’s failure to take responsibility for children and families. As we attempt to formulate more family-friendly policies, it is imperative that we study not only the reasons for men’s absence from the family but also the forces that undermine men’s commitment to it. At the same time we must acknowledge the reality of single-parent, women-headed families, and support rather than punish them.

On a brighter note, it appears that increasingly, men—and especially younger men—see the opportunity for more egalitarian relationships between men and women as a boon, a fortunate trend that may allow them to become more involved in family life and less beholden to strict and restrictive gender roles. These men decry the competition of the workplace and long working hours, which deprive them of a life balanced with family, leisure, and work.

Raising children in a complex, changing world is no easy task, and becomes even more complicated in families in which both parents are employed outside the home. From the interviews we learned that when a mother works, the father is becoming more willing to pitch in and share child care duties. Many fathers see this as an opportunity their own fathers didn’t have. Indeed, there is recognition that the connotation of fathering is becoming more than the dictionary definition of “begetting” or “siring” a child. The meaning of fathering is becoming parallel to that of mothering—to nurture and to nourish.

Government and business should join families in embracing this new partnership, and restructure labor policies to provide a more family-friendly work environment for parents, with flexible work hours, subsidized child care, and paid family leave. At the community level, intergenerational initiatives such as after-school programs that provide interaction between the elders and the young benefit both age groups and support families in general. Most of all, we must be clear about one thing: if our primary concern is children’s well-being, then supporting the adults who love and care for them is the priority, regardless of the marital status, gender, sexual orientation, or biological relationship of those caregivers. Secure parents raise secure children.

Today’s youth live in a confusing time, no matter where they reside. They are besieged by drugs, violence, pornographic images, and rampant materialism, and they often wonder where they will fit in a world where education is too costly, employment opportunities are few, and “making good” almost always means leaving the haven of the family far behind. For the youth of
less advantaged families, affordable educational opportunities and skills training programs are essential, and are too often sorely lacking.

The young also need guidance in family life skills, especially in the era of HIV/AIDS. The more one learns about local practices, the more it seems that talking to children about sexuality is almost universally avoided. Even the simplest facts of menstruation and hormonal development are often left shrouded in silence, resulting in fear and anxiety among adolescents or, worse, undesired pregnancies or illness. Although the family context is preferable for learning about the challenges of adulthood, considering the realities, schools must also provide basic family life education. The argument, put forth by conservative leaders, that sex education causes teens to initiate sex is simply false. Researchers in the United States, for example, have found that adolescents participating in several programs that combine discussions of abstinence with information about contraception have tended to delay having sex.²

It was truly remarkable to hear the young—both boys and girls—articulate their hopes for a life partner with the same education level and with whom they may “share everything,” including household tasks. Another profound change is many youths’ desired family size of two or three children, much smaller than the families in which they were raised.

For young people from poorer families, alas, there is a disturbing family dilemma: the lack of employment opportunities prevents them from starting families of their own. Their inability to marry and have children due to economic reasons has profound consequences for society. Adulthood denied may lead to disillusionment and anger.

The change in the natural environment described by the elders confirms that environmental degradation is proceeding at a swift pace, and that this destruction has a profound impact on family life. The Arctic ice cap has thinned by 40 percent; global warming threatens the world’s coastlines and the lives of billions of people; and thousands of chemicals are in our waters, soils, and air, and in the food we eat.³ Another century of careless exploitation of our natural environment will leave us bereft of untold species, life-giving forests, and sufficient potable water.

Initiatives to reduce pollution, conserve natural resources, and protect all fragile ecosystems and species must be undertaken now, at all levels—in schools, communities, nations, regions, and international bodies. Unfortunately, many leaders who profess to be concerned about “the family” permit and promote unfettered exploitation of the environment, ignoring the fact that family security is dependent upon long-term ecological security.

Just as environmental well-being is a global family concern, so, too, is human health. The diseases that stalk the earth travel from one continent
to another and can be prevented only by international initiatives. HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and public and private violence are all issues that require concerted action by nations working cooperatively. In the case of HIV/AIDS, for example, the wealthier countries must ensure that funds and drugs are made available to combat the wrenching crisis in Africa; failure to do so would be both morally reprehensible and pragmatically unwise. And as a world community, we cannot turn out backs on the millions of children orphaned by AIDS; a generation of young must be cared for and schooled, and this, too, will require focused multinational efforts. At national levels, investments in rural medical facilities, affordable urban clinics, and reproductive health care and education are already in demand, and that demand will only increase in the years ahead.

At the same time that information technology began to bring us together in a vast global family, it also began to separate us one from another within our families. It is no longer necessary to talk, listen, or be entertained as a family group. Human interaction is replaced by private entertainment, from Walkmen and portable telephones to home video and the Internet. Families of all backgrounds refer to the impact of these communications technologies on family communications, on the way families spend time together, and thus on family traditions and behavior. Seventy-nine-year-old Erna Beckmeyer of Hartsburg, Missouri, noted plaintively, "We don't face each other anymore when we talk. We're always facing the television."

Where once information and values were passed down by family elders, today they often come from afar, from totally different cultures, via mass media. Families everywhere expressed concern about the content of these media and voiced their fear of cultural homogenization and Westernization. A Jordanian grandfather complained, "Now we have TV as a third parent. It shows ugly things, violence and excessive liberty." In the absence of competing images, media have the potential to warp the young's fledgling value system. Public financial support for quality, educational media and for indigenous cultural institutions could help balance the picture they receive.

"Our responsibility," Jonas Salk often said, "is to anticipate the future." Being part of our global village requires a broadening of our sense of family, a commitment to a larger community. It demands solidarity with future generations everywhere, and a long-range view of our common well-being. Many interviewees expressed their concern that in this time of transition, it seems that our rights have run ahead of our sense of duty and responsibility to others. Teaching the next generation their rights and responsibilities, their obligations to community and society, must begin in the family.

Just as we ask families to be responsible for their own, we must ask our leaders to be responsible for the needs of future generations. That often means
espousing democratic principles and "family values," would deny equal rights to women, oppose family planning, and resist adherence to global conventions on the major transnational problems of our times.\(^5\) A farmer I met in rural Uganda remarked, "It worries me that people are not serious about changing the situation we are in. I was hoping that things would change—but the people we put our confidence in are not looking down at the grass-roots needs." Or, I would add, ahead to the future.

These family stories are not meant to be exhaustive or even representative. They serve only as sample testimony on the trends besetting families in a time of epochal change. From them we learn that global forces are shaping local realities as never before, that only a combination of global and local policies will meet the challenges now before the world community. Perhaps, also, this inquiry will expand our perception of others' lives and clarify, thus, our responsibilities for the common good.

The changes today's families are experiencing are the result of many trends, not all of them bad. The most important trend may well be the infusion of democratic and egalitarian ideals into family relationships and decision-making. The lament over lost family values is essentially a desire to return to a different time, when family and societal structures were rigid and clear. This is neither possible nor desirable.

The past century and its technological revolution have altered every facet of everyone's life—including the way families live, work, define themselves, make decisions, and spend time together. Families are smaller, more mobile, better educated, and, as a result, are exploring new roles for generations and the genders. This is not a change that can be reversed.

In the days before movies, radio, television, and the Internet, few people knew that alternatives existed to the way they lived or what they had. Before cars and trains, trucks and jets, they could not get to places where people lived differently, nor could new products get to them. Relatively few people had heard of the concept of individuals' rights; they were part of a family or clan and did what was expected of them. The concept of democracy, if not its total fulfillment, has now spread worldwide. Governments everywhere are being pressured by their citizens to yield to it. So, too, are families. This is not a change that can be reversed.

In the past, men ruled. Women helped. They did what they were allowed to do, or forced to do. Few women dared think they might aspire to more than marriage, frequent motherhood, and work in the home and on the land. Although some traditional societies afforded women a measure of power and respect within these roles, the roles were rigidly defined. Then came the idea that women could aspire to full participation in society at all levels and in many forms. If that were not enough, the advent of modern contraception provided
women with the means to decide if and when to bear children. This option, hitherto unknown in the human experience, changed forever the relationship between women and men. This is not a change that can be reversed.

The democratization of the family has had far-reaching effects. The young no longer accept elders' opinions without question. Children, who once worked and were brought up to fill their parents' shoes and take care of the elders in their turn, now attend school and come home with wide-ranging ideas and surprising goals. Many women have ambitions for themselves, beyond the goals of their menfolks and beyond the achievement of their children. A growing number of men are also declining prescribed gender roles by forming partnerships with their spouses and opting for more active participation in childrearing. More and more same-sex couples feel able to live openly and proudly. These are not changes that will be reversed.

These aspirations are not just disconcerting—they are revolutionary. The traditional patriarchal family is being transformed, and what's more, the traditional outcasts from the patriarchal family, such as single parents, childless adults, orphans, homosexuals, and even street children and prostitutes—all these people are finding that they can form new alliances that feel to them like families, and thus are families. They no longer need to win acceptance in a patriarchal setting—and that, to the patriarchs, may be the most disturbing change of all.

As tradition collides with democratization and globalization, all social institutions are undergoing profound reform; the family is no exception. The redefining of family relationships is a universal phenomenon. This situation may look like breakdown to those facing backward, but it looks like renovation to those facing the future. And if policymakers wish to support families, they must turn to face the future as well.

The concept of "family values" may have become corrupted and misused, but the value of families is beyond doubt. Across cultures and nationalities, throughout all social classes and degrees of education, these families' message is clear: We are all struggling with disruptive trends—some beneficial, some destructive—but the family group remains the undisputed and coveted foundation of human society.