LISTEN, DEMOCRATS!

Although Tikkun does not endorse or support the Democratic Party, it does recognize that an important debate is currently taking place both inside that party and, more generally, in the liberal and progressive world. It is a debate about the way to define politics in the period ahead.

In the articles below, we present three alternative perspectives. Although each writer might agree with many of the points raised by the other two, each puts primary emphasis on a way of thinking about politics that differs in fundamental ways from the others. Presidential candidates and others contending for elected office in 1988 would do well to consider carefully the positions being advanced here. And in the first article, written by our editor, we present a paradigm for liberals that goes far beyond any electoral focus and provides a fundamental critique not only of the current assumptions of liberal Democrats, but also of the thinking of various liberal and progressive social change movements that often call themselves "The Left."

A New Paradigm for Liberals: The Primacy of Ethics and Emotions

Michael Lerner

The Spring of 1987 is a heady time for Democrats and for the liberal and progressive forces in America. Flush from a promising electoral victory in 1986, buoyed by Reagan's Iranian affair that left his supposedly "teflon" presidency looking considerably less invulnerable, the Democrats have a unique opportunity to redefine their public image and put forward a vision of politics that will shape the debate well into the 1990s. The Democrats are at bat, and liberal and progressive social movements like those concerned with nuclear disarmament, anti-apartheid, women's rights, and social welfare will find their own prospects dramatically influenced by the degree to which the Democrats can foster a political climate supportive of innovation and social change.

But never underestimate the ability of Democrats to triumphantly snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Centrists within the party, rightly understanding that Reagan and the Right have touched some critical nerve in the American psyche, yet not really understanding the nature of the Right's psychological appeal, are foolishly counseling a path of "me-too-ism" in which Democrats will show the nation that they are really just a more moderate version of Reaganite conservatism—complete with inflated military budgets and "tough talk" about Russia, scaled down expectations for solving domestic poverty, and pro-corporate economic policies based on "trickle down" economics.

Liberals in the party, meanwhile, seem to think that if they can articulate an overall plan to deal with economic decline and the threat of international economic competition, tempering calls for self-sacrifice and austerity with promises of expanding the "social safety net" for the poor, they will appear neatly balanced between pragmatism and idealism. Even if such a scheme works to get Democrats back into the White House, it will not provide a political mandate for liberal politics. Instead, as in the Carter years, we will have a Democrat articulating a fundamentally pro-corporate agenda and this would eventually lead to the recrediting of the conservative agenda. If supporting corporate interests and fighting communism are really the highest goals of politics, the conservatives are "the real thing," so why support the ersatz Democratic Party version once the initial revulsion at "excesses" a la Contra-gate have been forgotten? Even in self-interest terms, then, the Democratic Party has much to gain by encouraging its liberal wing to project a genuinely creative new vision for American politics.

Yet the new vision that is needed is not merely a rehashing of ideas that are popular on the liberal-left. Of course we need full employment, health care, housing, disarmament, and equality in our society. But liberals will never have the political power to implement these ideas until they can speak to an even deeper level of human need. The liberals need a fuller understanding of the psychological and spiritual needs of the American people—and a vision of how these needs could be met within the framework of a new moral order. Putting together a list of "new ideas," trying to convince the press "we have the beef," will continue to be an inadequate strategy until the Democrats construct
a vision which addresses the underlying philosophical, moral and psychological issues that motivate most people.

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A new vision for Democrats will only be really new if it transcends two major weaknesses in contemporary liberal thinking: the myth of externality and the excessive focus on individual rights.

The Myth of Externality. This is the fallacy of conceptualizing people as being motivated by a narrow range of external economic and political self-interest issues. Operating from this fallacy, the task of the liberal Democrat becomes how to show that liberal policies will directly benefit people's material self-interest. So Democrats focus primarily on tinkering with the economy or providing funds to build highways and transportation, money for welfare, or better housing or health care, or higher social benefits for the elderly. This is supposed to be pragmatic, hard-nosed, and realistic.

It would be silly to deny that economic issues are important to many sectors of the population. The 1986 election showed that many economic populist themes had deep resonance within important sectors of the population. Democrats will be politically stronger if they have the courage to integrate these themes into their politics in the coming years. A smart plan to reindustrialize America, rebuild its scientific and technological infrastructure, and increase its ability to use its material and human resources in productive ways—if that plan includes increased democratic participation in the management of our corporations and in the investment of our resources—can only increase the Democrats' appeal.

*Never underestimate the ability of Democrats to triumphantly snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.*

It is equally important to note that these issues no longer enthuse as large a segment of the population as they seemed to in the days when the Depression (or in subsequent decades, its memory) shaped American political reality. In the 1980s we have had numerous instances where the very workers whose economic well-being has been threatened by conservative policies nevertheless identify with the Right's social program and vote "against their economic interests." While acquiring a bigger share of the pie may influence many people's decisions in their private economic lives, it does not always determine their political choices.

It may even be a mistake to give an economic-reductionist account of the Democrats' original mass appeal during the New Deal. The New Deal, after all, did not solve the economic crisis of a faltering capitalism in the 1930s. Only vast military expenditures during World War II and the perpetuation of military spending through a post-WW II anti-Communist crusade managed to stabilize the economic picture for most Americans. It was not the economic miracle that tied most Americans to Roosevelt and the Democrats. Rather, the widespread feeling that these liberal Democrats could understand the inner experience of daily life encouraged identification with them. By articulating a social vision that helped people understand how the problems they were facing in their daily life were reflections of larger social problems and not of personal failures, the liberals helped to decrease the "self-blaming" endemic in a capitalist economy ("you get what you deserve") and to increase Americans' ability to have compassion for themselves. It was this compassion that was the basis for the Democrat's vast popularity, providing the foundation for a political mandate to carry out economic and political programs.

What has happened in the last few decades has been a shift in the locus of self-blame. Although America's economic expansion was eventually slowed by a rebuilt Europe and Japan, its initial economic hegemony in the post-WW II decades enabled American corporations to inherit many of the economic benefits of a faltering European colonialism and to use the wealth thereby accumulated to enlarge America's economic pie. While inequalities of wealth and power persisted, the growth in absolute terms of the standard of living for most Americans allowed American ideologists to proclaim a new age of affluence marred by only a few "pockets of poverty." Although never fully economically secure, and although now ridden with stressful work and intense competition, most Americans experienced their economic lives as considerably less problematic than in the past. Increasingly they came to believe that the "good life" was at hand; all they had to do was be "successful" and real human fulfillment would be theirs. Happiness was increasingly defined in terms of personal life, supposedly available to each person according to his/her own merit. And when people began to discover that their expanded material well-being had not brought an increase in satisfaction (indeed, the satisfactions of human community, friendship, and solidarity seemed less available after the Depression and WW II) a new and even more painful self-blaming came to dominate the social psychology of American life.

The new self-blaming is deeper and more intractable precisely because it draws upon the deepest wellsprings
of our societal ideology. Inequalities of wealth and power have always been justified in America on the grounds of a supposedly meritocratic economic marketplace which allocates rewards according to ability and effort. This ideology seemed considerably less self-evidently true during the Depression when Democrats suggested everyone was suffering from a common economic problem. But with post-war prosperity, the ideology revived with an even deeper vigor and was extended to virtually every area of personal life. Everything was supposedly in the hands of the individual—s/he could shape a fate alone, based on his/her own decisions. “Take responsibility for your own life,” “You’ve made your bed, now sleep in it,” and “You can make it if you really try” are pop-psychology formulations of what became the deepest belief in America’s religiously held ideology: the belief in meritocracy. If you merit happiness, you will get it; if you don’t have it, you have only yourself to blame.

It is not hard to see how this way of thinking was functional for those with established power. Corporations could use the resulting psychology of self-blame and insecurity to sell their products: If you aren’t yet achieving happiness in your personal life, it’s probably because you haven’t been using our product. But at a deeper level, the continued existence of fundamental inequalities of wealth and power could be portrayed as reflections of an inherently just society. As long as equality of opportunity was secured for all, the inequalities of outcome were merely reflections of different ability and merit. This internalization of self-blame on the part of the masses of Americans produced a set of deep psychic scars, resulting in a growing crisis in personal life, increasing instability in family life, decreasing community ties and increasing difficulties in maintaining deep friendships, and the absence of larger ethical ties and commitments. In turn, all these social realities were interpreted by most people as personal deficiencies. The material well-being of post-WW II society has not produced a society full of happiness, but one full of pain and neurosis, a society in which people interpret socially generated problems like the increasing instability in family life as reflective primarily of their own personal inadequacies.

W hile the locus of self-blame has shifted, the locus of liberals’ compassion has not. Liberals have rightly championed the poor and those facing overt racial and sexual discrimination. But for the most part liberal compassion has been restricted to the most overt economic and legal oppression. It’s as if they remained frozen in “1930s consciousness,” giving compassion only to people in the economic Depression, while ignoring the growing psychological depression. The result is that when they talk about compassion, they mean only compassion for the poor and those facing overt discrimination, leaving out nearly everyone else.

Given the externality fallacy, however, liberal Democrats are likely to hear this call for compassion as an appeal for more social welfare programs, only now addressed to the economic interests of middle-income voters. Certainly it is true that the Democratic Party needs to develop programs that can link these voters with the economic interests of the poor, and that the development of programs for housing, health care, and full employment may provide such a link. But while such programs would follow from the compassion I am talking about, they do not constitute it. Rather, I am talking about a new kind of compassion—a compassion that counteracts the self-blaming that dominates personal life today. It is by understanding and acknowledging the pain that people are experiencing in these not-strictly-economic arenas, the pain in families, the pain generated by the absence of community and an ethical frame to life, that the liberals can connect with the deeper needs that are central to contemporary American politics.

The internalization of self-blame on the part . . . of Americans produced a set of deep psychic scars, resulting in a growing crisis in personal life . . .

Ironically, it has been the conservatives who have been able to address these issues and thereby appeal to a large segment of Americans who might otherwise be resentful of the conservatives’ defense of corporate interests. The pro-family politics the New Right has articulated has struck a chord precisely because it seems to address self-blame and despair. It is certainly true that right wing programs offer no plausible solution to the crisis of families. Many of the people who have been drawn to the Right have not been persuaded by the specifics of its program. But pro-family politics nevertheless has a powerful draw because it acknowledges the crisis in personal lives while pointing the finger at a set of social causes (feminism, gays, “liberal permissiveness”) that are not the fault of individual Americans.

While strongly rejecting the conservatives’ scapegoating, we can also see that by encouraging people to find a social cause for family crisis they decrease self-blame and increase self-compassion—and this is what makes the conservative pro-family package attractive to many Americans. Instead of denouncing the reactio-
nary content, and implying that anyone drawn to pro-family politics is merely someone who wishes to oppress women and children (a line taken by, among others, feminist leader Barbara Ehrenreich), we would do well to see that the underlying needs to which these politics appeal are quite reasonable. It is perfectly understandable that people in pain would respond to those who seem to understand their pain and who articulate externalized, social solutions.1 The irony here, as I shall explore in greater detail below, is that it is precisely the economic order that the conservatives support which plays a central role in creating and sustaining the dynamics that undermine family life. But, as long as the whole issue has been ignored by the liberals, or, as in the Democratic National Committee's latest attempts at "me-too-ism," simply dealt with by adding a few "pro-family programs" to a long list of other demands without any understanding of the deeper psychological and philosophical issues, conservatives will continue to appear as the pro-compassion force in society. No matter how often Democrats throw the word compassion around, as long as what they mean is compassion for somebody else (the poor, the oppressed) while ignoring the deep need for compassion of the average middle-income American grappling with the pains of daily life, they are likely to be greeted with distrust by most Americans (even those who on simple economic grounds have more reason to support the Democrats than their opponents).2

This analysis helps us understand the popularity of Reagan in the first six years of his presidency. Reagan's picture of an America in which people could find true community and pride in their lives offered a seductive alternative to self-blaming. We need not adopt or accept one individual (or even one family) alone. Real empowerment, then, may require understanding the larger social forces that shape our individual situation, and then learning how to join with others in taking not individual but collective responsibility for solving the problem on our own! To apply this to a current debate: It is true that seeing themselves as victims may not help inner-city blacks—but neither has preaching to them about individual responsibility. What is most empowering is a vision of collective responsibility—that only by working together on an intolerable social reality can individual lives ultimately improve.

1. Throughout this essay I shall talk about the pain in daily life as a general and widespread social phenomenon, not confined to those who are in acute crisis, family breakdown, or seeking psychological help. The basis for these sweeping assumptions is defined more carefully in my book Surplus Powerlessness (1986) and is grounded in six years of empirical research that I conducted at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health in Oakland, California. In the course of analyzing several thousand interviews with working people from every sector of the work force, we discovered a deep pattern of pain, self-blaming and internalized anger that is related to the analysis in this article. We should also note, of course, that alongside this pain there is also much joy and satisfaction in some aspects of family and personal life. Usually, it is this side that is accentuated, and used as a first level of cover or "defense" against dealing with the deep and pervasive pain that is also there. In this essay I focus primarily on the pain. In a more complete account the elements of happiness and pride would also have to be acknowledged and addressed.

2. Liberal psychologists have only compounded the problem by popularizing the notion that the way to true emotional health is to learn to take responsibility for yourself and your own life. Of course, it is true that we should avoid the extreme of "victimization" that leads some people to feel passive and unable to act—conveniently blaming "the system" for their own failures to act in ways that could change their situation. But more often than not, the factors working to shape our reality are not created by

a similar patriotic chauvinism, but we do need to be able to understand the seductiveness of such an appeal. Instead of denouncing programs or ideologies as reactionary or fascistic, we must attempt to understand the underlying psychological needs that these ideologies gratify. We can then begin to ask how we might develop alternative programs and analyses that speak to what is legitimate in these needs. Who knows whether liberals in Germany, had they been able to think in these terms in the 1920s, might not have been able to develop a more relevant program in countering fascism, rather than just ineffectively denouncing it.

In our case, I have little hope of speaking to the hard-core twenty percent of the population enamored of racist, sexist and patriarchal notions. But there are many others, people who often represent the swing vote in an election, whose attraction to the Right has much more to do with the issues I am discussing than with a knee-jerk conservatism. These people will vote for candidates who make them feel good about themselves or who at least can distract them from feeling bad. From this perspective, there is no magical mystique about Reagan as the "great communicator": his strength lies primarily in his ability to reduce self-blaming and provide a way for people to feel compassionate toward themselves. Similarly, the great candidates of the late 1980s and the 1990s will not be those who are most photogenic or have mysterious charisma, but those who are best able to make people feel affirmed, and who can help them deal with the real pain they experience because of the breakup of families, the decline in friendships, the breakdown of communities, and the absence of a morally coherent way of understanding their world.3

3. We do not want to substitute a politics of emotion for a politics of rationality. In the long run, the great strength of the liberal and progressive forces is their ability to provide a rational account of the world, and to increase the total rationality in the world. It is precisely because—and to the extent that—we speak the truth about the world that people have grounds to trust us. But we have not been narrow in the focus of our rational thinking and have failed to address the rational foundations for people's emotional pain. Conversely, their pain has kept them from hearing the rational content of many of our ideas. To shift towards a focus on emotional life, then, is not to shift towards a primacy of feeling over intellect, but to a focus on using our intellectual strengths to give us guidance on how to repair the emotional damage created by our social order.
If one consequence of the fallacy of externality has been to keep Democrats from understanding ordinary Americans’ central need for compassion, a second consequence has been to overlook the need for a moral framework for politics and daily life. The thirst for moral meaning is one of the deepest in American life. The latest rebirth of religion in America is partially affirmed. American politics. Ty, one can find a moral vision to order events, locate oneself in history, and find one’s own moral intuitions affirmed.

Moral vision, far from being a “soft issue,” is potentially the guts of American politics.

It is precisely this ability to speak to ethical norms, to call for a return to “traditional values,” which has been engraved on the calling cards of the New Right. Yet it was the same commitment to ethical norms that also fueled the great social movements of the 1960s. Unfortunately, Marxist materialists and pro-capitalist cynics often join forces to reduce these struggles to seemingly narrow self-interest projects. For example, the anti-Vietnam War protests can be seen by these cynics as a self-interested struggle against the draft. But those who carefully chronicle the 1960s know that the militant demonstrations in which college students took serious risks to their lives and careers started before the draft reached into middle-class constituencies; that many of those who took part never were at risk of being drafted; and that the biggest anti-war demonstrations took place after the draft had stopped posing any serious threat to the majority of college students who participated in them. A deep moral outrage fueled the anti-war protests and the civil rights protests before them.

It was only when the New Leftists felt they had lost their internal sense of moral legitimacy (partially a result of the violence introduced into the Movement by the Weathermen and other “super-militants,” partly the result of the Women’s Movement and its focus on the New Leftist’s sexism) that activism gave way to a more internally focused approach to change. But even in the 1970s, when most 1960s activists had put some distance between politics and their pursuit of individual self-realization, they understood themselves not as having abandoned the moral quest for a good society, but as contributing to a social transformation—precisely by changing themselves. It was only with the triumph of selfishness in the 1980s that self-realization fully yielded to self-gratification, as many Yuppies left behind the larger moral vision (and even then, the moral claims were not renounced, but only put aside as “unrealistic for the 1980s”).

The deep moral thirst of Americans is emphasized once again in their genuine revulsion at Watergate, and now, the Iran-Contra scandal. Before being manipulated by the press into restraining their spontaneous moral outrage, most Americans responded to the revelations that they had been lied to with a quite fitting sense that this was just plain wrong.

The shallowness of many centrist Democrats is reflected in the statements of “concern” that the crisis not weaken “the Presidency.” Many Democrats are joining Republicans in calling for a speedy resolution so that we can “return to the business of the country”—as though establishing clear moral requirements and democratic restraints on the Presidency was not precisely the best way they could use their time. If eventually the issue is dropped by Democrats who are unwilling to demand full moral accountability from a president who has broken the law, it will be because of their own inability to adequately articulate back to the country the moral revulsion that was the spontaneous reaction of most citizens. But the underlying reality remains: Americans deeply want a moral world, where they seemed to be morally confused bureaucrats, and now are disillusioned with him to the extent that they find his morality less credible. Moral vision, far from being a “soft issue,” is potentially the guts of American politics.

When moral concerns do sometimes play second-fiddle in politics, it's usually not because they yield to hard-boiled pragmatics and economics, but rather to personal pain that so grips our consciousness that we have trouble hearing our own inner moral voice. When people feel badly about themselves, when their lives seem to be confusing, they often has so little appeal. The people hearing this term don’t know about the pains the rest of the people are experiencing) is telling them to pay attention to people...
who are worse off than themselves. When this resentment becomes strong, moral intuitions begin to cloud and childhood feelings of helplessness and need lead people to accept political views and follow political leaders they might otherwise dismiss, leaders who seem to affirm them and recognize their pain.

By ignoring these two central dimensions—the psychological pain of daily life and the deep need for a moral universe—liberal Democrats often put themselves in a strange kind of political isolation. They can sometimes win elections despite themselves—as they may do in 1988—but they never perceive themselves as having a strong enough mandate to legislate adequately funded, comprehensive and coherent programs.

What they consistently fail to win is a deep level of trust. By staying away from the psychological and moral needs of their constituents they create a powerful barrier to ever getting the kind of support they need to make a lasting political contribution.

**People who spend all day manipulating and controlling others eventually form personality structures that are narcissistic . . . and they are in no position to enter into intimate relationships.**

Nowhere is the centrality of these concerns more evident than in the fates of the Labor Movement and the Women's Movement. The Labor Movement is the purest embodiment of the externality fallacy. The economic reductionists who run the AFL-CIO have bet the future of the Labor Movement on the assumption that what all workers care about is bread-and-butter issues. The emotional detachment of union members from their own unions, the cynicism they express about their leaders, and the lack of interest in union meetings is largely a result of defining unions as places to get benefits and due-process when management acts against negotiated work rules. But the guts of the work process—the stress that people experience each day at the workplace, their lack of opportunity to use their intelligence and creativity, the lack of respect with which they are treated, the absence of workplace democracy—in short, everything that causes the daily experience of pain at work—these are all ignored as somehow “subjective” issues that supposedly the membership doesn’t care about.

Faced with massive defections and a membership that often doesn’t support the candidates that Labor endorse, Labor leaders are now searching for some new economic gimmick—perhaps an associate membership or a union credit card or some new material benefit that will revitalize their show. In national politics, they push Democrats to make new economic programs a central focus. These geniuses, fresh from engineering the Mondale fiasco, are ready to go down with their ailing Labor Movement rather than to formulate any new policies that would recognize people’s emotional and moral needs.

The Women’s Movement burst onto the political scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s with a moral vision and psychological acuity that quickly commanded the attention of the American people. Based in consciousness raising groups, addressing the daily experience of people caught in the vice of sexist assumptions and practices, the feminists spoke with a moral authority and emotional depth that no one could ignore. Understandably, many women wanted to channel the incredible energy unleashed in this process into achieving concrete changes in political and economic realities. Unfortunately, women too quickly traded “consciousness raising” for “hard-nosed” realistic politics. As their strategies became reduced to winning legislative victories, or convincing state legislators to vote for ERA, the connection to personal life began to seem more remote, and fewer and fewer women felt inflamed by the original passion. As legislative victories were won, it became increasingly difficult to pass the feminist torch to a younger generation of women for whom the right to legal equality seemed already given and who had never been challenged to understand the deeper meaning of feminism. By framing politics in narrow external terms, the realists managed to squash the moral fervor and emotional immediacy that had given the women’s movement its main power.

**“Individual Rights” Consciousness.** This is the second element in the liberal paradigm that must be changed. Its core is this: the assumption that the individual exists outside of a complex set of human relationships, as a being apart. Others are seen primarily as potential threats to one’s independence and autonomy. In this context, the liberals come forward as champions of individual rights, protecting us from the external coercion of the state, the community or other individuals. Yet the emphasis on individual rights has important hidden costs.

The focus on the rights of individuals has given the liberals a tremendous credibility—and for good reason. Although the picture of the world painted by this focus is certainly distorted—human beings are fundamentally
Social and born into families and communities, they depend on each other for survival and cannot flourish without the loving affirmation of others—its original function was to provide a bulwark against a coercive form of communitarianism that was embodied in the feudal order. For thousands of years people lived in traditional or feudal societies in which every aspect of their lives and thinking was prescribed for them by the larger society. For those of us who are several generations removed from any community governed by traditional or feudal norms, it is hard to imagine the pain inflicted upon people who had no exit from arranged marriages, who were continually observed and judged by how much their behavior conformed with the behavioral standards of the community, and who were dominated by religious norms that made them feel guilty about their sexual drives and desires. The liberal rebellion against external compulsion was a breath of fresh air to people who felt themselves suffocating under the demands of family, religion and traditional values. The rights of the individual became the intellectual battle-rams used to smash through repressive legislation, customs, and traditions—and to create an ability to discern our own needs and wants from those induced through societal norms.

Yet the struggle for individual rights created a distorted tilt in liberal politics. First, it misidentified the real problem. Feudal societies were not really communities in any meaningful sense. They were hierarchies in which a small group of people (feudal lords and their allies in the Church or established religious and intellectual elites) used the language of community, family, religion and ethics to impose their private agendas on the rest of society. Liberals struggling against this coercion understandably overreacted, suspecting that every time someone talked about ethical obligation the underlying agenda was manipulation. They were unable to distinguish between the coercive use of institutions by ruling elites and the appropriate use of notions like “obligation to community,” when that community was democratically structured and provided respect and autonomy to its participants. This distinction would have seemed quite irrelevant to those who needed all the energy and moral righteousness they could amass to fight oppressive structures in the past—but it is critically important today when many of the battles against feudalism have actually been won.

Second, the struggle for individual rights, posed as a demand to keep society from making any claims on the individual, led in two different and sometimes contradictory directions. On the one hand, it allowed people to insist that they have the right to define for themselves the kind of lives they want to live, with whom and under what conditions. On the other hand, it also was used as a justification for the newly emerging class of merchants, entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and bankers to insist on freedom of the marketplace. To them, individual rights meant their right to create an economic life not subject to interference by societal or ethical norms.

Over the past two hundred years much conflict has resulted from these two alternative manifestations of individual rights. Increasing numbers of individuals have come to realize that their ability to define lives for themselves is very limited if they have to spend most of their waking hours in a world that has been shaped by others. Yet, stuck with the commitment to an abstract concept of individual rights, fearing that any legitimation of communal norms and ethical categories might give the society a mandate to once again dictate standards for personal life, the liberals have been unwilling to act on their correct intuitive belief that there must be some constraints on the power of capitalists to shape American economic life.

When the capitalist economy was in total crisis during the Depression, liberals created programs to alleviate the worst suffering generated by the system—but they did so not in the name of new values, but rather in the name of strengthening the system of individual freedoms, including the freedom of the marketplace. Ultimately, this has left the liberals unable to justify continued interference with the prerogatives of capital once the most serious elements of an economic crisis have abated. Unless they can develop a notion of ethical obligations to the community, liberals will always seem to be on the defensive when they advocate limitations on the rights of individual entrepreneurs while simultaneously proclaiming their highest value as the rights of the individual.

But there are deeper problems caused by the view that the world is constituted of abstract entities called “citizens” who hold “rights.” Once we begin to abstract from the concrete social and economic realities within which people really live, we fall easy prey to the mythology of meritocracy. We come to think that when all external legal constraints have been eliminated, the individual person can actually shape his/her life in any way s/he wants—limited only by internal constraints. So we talk about the right to the pursuit of happiness—and this translates into a mythology of society in which there is equal opportunity for all. The underlying assumption is that the economic marketplace will reward merit and endeavor, and those who succeed will be those who deserve to succeed. The only task for the liberal is to remove

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external constraints to “equal opportunity” and then we will all be able to compete fairly in the marketplace. The actual inequalities of wealth and power disappear, and once again we are faced with a picture of reality in which we have only ourselves to blame for not having fulfilling jobs and satisfying personal lives. So, ironically, individual rights consciousness contributes to a world view that reinforces self-blame. If the individual is the core of reality, it is the individual we ultimately blame when satisfaction has not been achieved.

But the deepest problem with individual rights consciousness is that this focus shapes human beings whose hallmark is their isolation from others. Liberals have fostered a world view in which individuals see themselves as isolated beings who enter into relationships with others on a contractual basis aimed at increasing individual satisfactions.

The picture itself is severely flawed. No human being is “self-made.” Not only does everyone go through a long childhood nurtured by family or family-surrogates, but these families themselves stand in a rich web of social relationships which make it possible for them to provide the nurturance and support we need to develop. No matter how much of a “loner” any individual eventually becomes, s/he inevitably draws upon the linguistic, cultural and scientific legacies from previous generations. Even more important is this: Every human being has a fundamental desire to be recognized, desired and needed by others. It is an ontological necessity of being human that we be confirmed, seen, experienced, and loved. The person who thinks s/he made it on his/her own is simply deluded—s/he has been blinded by an individualistic ideology to the socially constructed network of dependencies and the contribution of others that made possible his/her individual path. We are deeply rooted in social histories—yet the philosophy of individualism encourages us to think of ourselves as alone and separate from others, owing them nothing, and entitled to get what we can for ourselves even at the expense of others.

This focus on individual rights distorts human relationships. The logic of love is different from the logic of rights. Families are held together not by reciprocal exchange between independent contractors, but by cross-generational love. Parents’ giving to their children is not and cannot be reciprocated by children who feel under some contractual obligation to repay what has been given to them. Loving relationships between people are undermined to the extent that they become dominated by a bookkeeping of equal exchange. If relationships are seen primarily in terms of contracts between individuals out to maximize their own benefits, then very quickly we get to the current situation: a marketplace in relationships in which people are encouraged to discard the “old model” and find someone new the moment difficulties emerge. It is precisely this thinking which accelerates the contemporary crisis of the family.

In fact, what gets called the crisis in the family is actually a crisis in all human relationships. If everyone views relationships primarily from the standpoint of what s/he can get out of other people, then all relationships become much more problematic. This is why divorce statistics tend to underestimate the scope of the contemporary problem: even families which do stay together experience the growing sense of insecurity generated by a society in which everyone is taught to see affective ties as instrumental to achieving personal goals. Nor is the impact of this crisis confined to families: the growing sense that friendships “aren’t what they used to be,” that it is harder to establish and maintain deep loyalty and connectedness between friends, is not just a romanticizing of “good old days.” These difficulties are, in part, generated by a society which encourages a level of selfishness and self-centeredness, parading under the banner of “individual rights,” that makes deep friendship seem naive and foolish.

Is it any wonder, then, that many Americans, deeply aware of the emotional pains in their daily life, are unattracted to the liberals (even when they agree with many specifics of liberal programs)? On the one hand, the liberals seem unwilling to address the emotional and moral issues that are central to human needs. On the other hand, the liberals seem to advocate a way of looking at the world that reinforces self-blaming and undermines love and caring. For these fundamental reasons, anyone who is concerned about the political fate of the liberal forces in the U.S. (and this should include those in the social change movements who normally don’t spend their time worrying about the Democratic Party but who nevertheless can only implement their politics if the Democrats win) has a deep stake in the liberals adopting a new political paradigm.

The irony in the plight of the liberals is that they have allowed themselves to become the fall guys for problems that they did not really create. The conservatives, positioning themselves as the champions of the family, traditional values, and obligation to community, have been able to hold the moral high ground only because the liberals have failed to take these issues
seriously enough and have pursued instead a politics framed by a focus on the externals of politics. If liberals were to address the emotional crisis of self-blaming in daily life, the decline in moral vision, and the limitations of a philosophy of individualism, they could turn the tide in American politics.

The reason that liberals could change the picture is this: the basic problems we have been addressing are not the result of liberal ideas, but of social and economic realities that the conservatives are committed to defending. Let us consider, for example, the crisis in relationships that is often described as "the breakdown of the family."

Human relationships depend on trust, caring, and the ability to give to the other. These are not the personality traits fostered by our economic system. The "successful" American spends much of his/her day manipulating and controlling others. In a previous generation these were activities reserved primarily for the businessman and salesperson. But today, being a successful manipulator of others is increasingly the ticket to success in all aspects of corporate life, in large governmental bureaucracies, even in academia. Moreover, in the past the goal was to sell a product. Today each person must increasingly view herself or himself as the product to be sold—and the task is to shape oneself to have the appropriate personality, appearance, education, even "psychological awareness" to make oneself an attractive commodity, the kind of person who will be rewarded with promotions, clients, or customers. People, then, must learn to manipulate others, and even to manipulate themselves—always with a view to how the abstract "other" will see them. But people who spend all day manipulating and controlling others eventually form personality structures that are narcissistic and removed from real feelings. They have no idea of who they are apart from what vision "will sell"—and so they are in no position to enter into intimate relationships. It's not that they are hiding themselves as much as that they increasingly have no contact with their inner cores—so they have no way of sharing authentic feelings with others. On the surface they may be successful—but it is hard for them to keep in touch with anything deeper within themselves, much less to share that with others.

More than anything, it is the development of this kind of personality that undermines relationships, families, and friendships. Yet this is not a personal problem of a few "troubled" individuals—this is a major social reality that has increasingly dominated American life in the past several decades and threatens to grow worse. Precisely as we become a society less oriented towards information and service, these kinds of personality traits become generalized (in fact, even those who don't actually use them in their work see this way as being the strategy to success and study various self-help books or take courses in self-improvement so that they can become more like the people who are actually "making it"). To the extent that this kind of personality takes root, friendship and loyalty, trust and commitment become harder to attain.

This is why no short-term "family programs" will ultimately work—because the problem is to create a society that fosters a different kind of personality, a personality that builds on trust, caring and the ability to give to others. That may take changes beyond the scope of any short-term program liberal Democrats are willing to propose at this point. But, nevertheless, simply articulating this analysis, helping people understand that the problems in their relationships are rooted in the way we are forced to succeed in the world of work, can itself be an important contribution. Imagine if the Democratic Party were to talk about how the world of work encourages people to act in ways that undermine our ability to love. Or imagine them addressing unmarried people about the problems of building lasting relationships with those who have to spend all day manipulating others. Imagine the Democrats talking about why it becomes hard, given the competitive thrust of economic life, for people to trust each other and build lasting commitments. Talking in these kinds of terms would help many understand the social context to their individual lives and families, would undermine self-blaming, and would provide a message of compassion that was at once true and nourishing.

Precisely because we need to foster personality structures that are open, loving and caring we must reject the philosophy of selfishness that guides conservatives in their dealings with the poor. A society that preaches miserly conduct to the disadvantaged, that makes the poor feel ashamed of their poverty and encourages its middle classes to feel ripped off to the extent that public funds are used to solve problems of the poor, is a society that will foster human beings who do not understand generosity of the heart. It is this way of thinking, encouraged by the political conservatives, that strengthens the character traits most destructive to friendships and family life. People begin to measure out every act of love and kindness—demanding an immediate return on their investment. Grown children no longer respond to the needs of their aging parents—after all, what's in it for them? The very essence of friendship—spontaneous giving to the other—begins to seem like naive foolishness. The way that we learn to treat others in the larger society, then,
 encourages a spirit of selfishness that fits well into the
dynamics of a capitalist marketplace—but that simul-
taneously weakens our ability to have real friendships and
commitments.

Apart from fostering a personality structure that is
destructive to loving relationships, our economic and
social arrangements, manifested in the world of work,
play a more immediate role in undermining family life.
The vast majority of Americans face work situations in
which they are unable to use their intelligence, creativity and ability to cooperate with each other. Absent any
significant control of this fundamental dimension of
their life, they increasingly experience work as stress-
ful—and this seemingly “merely subjective” valuation
of their work has corresponded to a dramatic increase
in stress-related physical health problems. But, stress at
work is not only bad for health—but also for family
life. Typically, stress is greatly intensified by self-blame.
Rather than demand changes in their working condi-
tions, most workers have bought into the ideology of
the meritocracy. Although they know that their working
conditions are fundamentally stressful, they believe it is
their own fault for having stressful jobs. Most Ameri-
cans nurture a story of self-blame that goes something
like this: “If only I had been smarter, worked harder,
made different choices or had been more attractive
physically or more charming or had a better personality,
or in some other way been different than I am, I
wouldn’t have this stressful job. So I have only myself
to blame for my situation.”

While inducing this way of thinking may be very
useful for the conservatives—after all, their justification
for the vast inequalities of wealth and power in the
society rests on convincing everyone else that they only
deserve what they have actually received—it is ex-
tremely destructive to family life. People return home
from work not only stressed from their powerlessness,
but also feeling terrible for having hard work. Instead of feeling angry at the situation and energized
to change it, they feel angry at themselves (and discour-
aged about who they are as persons). The shame of not
having “made it” into more fulfilling work—no matter
what their actual level of achievement—causes great
pain; and many people spend their time at home frenet-
ically seeking ways to drown that anger they feel to-
wards themselves.

The methods vary. For some, the pain of internalized
anger and self-blaming can best be attenuated by al-
cohol or drugs or watching television (particularly
shows that are not real enough to remind one of these
painful emotions). For others, frenetic participation in
sports, aerobics, exercise, politics, religion, or social
life (activities that may be valuable in themselves—but
which get pursued in a frenetic manner when they are
used as an escape from the pain of the world of work)
may do the job. But whatever avenue is pursued, the
person who feels the need to drown her/his pain is to
that extent blocked from participating in the kind of
openness and sharing that strong intimate relationships
require. So family life becomes increasingly emotionally
sterile. To share one’s feelings in this case would be to
share feelings of anger and shame and self-blame. Most
people feel sure that sharing these kinds of feelings
would only diminish them in the eyes of their family—
the one place where they still have hopes of receiving
the kind of respect that is so frequently absent in the
world of work. So they do everything they can to “make
things nice” by staying away from their real feelings and
projecting a veneer of “everything is fine.” Over time,
they may become so efficient at this that they themselves
have little direct contact with these underlying feelings.
The emotional emptiness that many people report ex-
periencing in family life is a predictable consequence.

In many families the underlying anger pushes its way
through somehow—sometimes in an unexpected edge
of coldness or hostility, sometimes in overt bursts of
anger, usually inappropriately displaced onto spouse or
children. Yet people rarely understand the coldness,
the hostility, or the outbursts of anger as the legacy of
the world of work. Instead, they see these feelings as
coming from nowhere—“out of the blue”—and this
makes them even more scary, leading the self-blamers
to work harder to repress their feelings. But a person
working hard to suppress her/his feelings is a very poor
candidate for a lasting and loving relationship. So either
the relationships blow up and dissolve, or people end
up settling for family life that is superficial and devoid
of real contact and feeling.

We may not expect an immediate transformation in
the world of work that totally eliminates these dynam-
ics. But if liberals begin to talk about the pain in family
life in terms of the real underlying issues that make
relationships so much harder to sustain, they will both
help in reducing the self-blaming and find that people
begin to believe them when they say they are pro-family.
Talking at this level will also quickly expose the shallow-
ness and fundamental opportunism in the conserva-
tive’s attempt to portray themselves as pro-family.

A similar kind of analysis could also show that the
breakdown of communities and of moral values was
more a product of the workings of the capitalist market-
place than conservatives have been willing to face. If
people are spending all day long involved in economic
relationships of exploitation, manipulation, and the
subordination of ethics to profit, they will develop
personality structures that have no place for ethical
imperatives in their personal life. To strengthen
America’s moral fibre, we need to create an economic
life that daily reinforces our desire to treat other people as ultimately valuable subjects—not as enemies with whom we must compete.

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The liberal forces within the Democratic Party should take the leadership in forging a new direction for the party: a direction that focuses on the central issue of creating a society that promotes rather than undermines love, friendship, community and moral values. It is precisely the liberals who should insist on reframing the political dialogue within the Democratic Party—insisting on the priority of ethical vision and a commitment to dealing with the emotional needs of the American people.

The dominant paradigm for liberal politics should be the fostering of loving relationships within a morally strong community. The most important contribution they can make is to popularize an analysis of these problems that helps decrease self-blaming and increase compassion. Programs and legislation should be justified in these terms, public statements focused on these issues, and campaigns run on these themes.

Here are some of the concrete steps that must be taken:

1. Liberals should create a new national organization or coalition of existing organizations—perhaps we could call it Friends of the Family—that would articulate a pro-family agenda for the liberal world and would act as a public vehicle through which liberals in the Democratic Party and outside it could work together to promote a pro-family politics.

2. Liberals in Congress in both parties should meet together and foster a pro-family legislative focus. Unlike Reagan and the right wing pro-family rhetoric, a liberal program would be based on the kind of analysis articulated above and giving particular focus to the way that the world of work and the psychodynamics of self-blaming undermined family life. Among the kinds of legislative issues to be considered would be: a.) mandating workplaces to allow the creation of workplace safety and health committees elected by the workers and empowered to force changes in the conditions of work, so as to promote greater opportunity for workers to cooperate with each other, use their own intelligence and creativity, and participate in decision-making both in their own shops and in the larger decisions of the enterprise in which they work; b.) supplemental parental financial supports during the first seven years of a child's life—both to relieve the burdens of families with incomes under $70,000 a year, and to communicate the message that even those who do not have children should bear some of the cost for those who take on the valued role of raising the next generation; c.) mandating that workplaces provide extra sick days for children's illnesses, and extra leniency for tardiness when family emergencies intrude into daily life; d.) requiring workplaces to provide fully paid paternity and maternity leaves for six months; e.) creating a well-funded nationwide network of community-controlled child care centers based on a voucher system, so that parents could choose a model that fits their own ethical, emotional and religious beliefs, and funding communities to train childcare workers in programs shaped to meet the local communities' own needs; f.) a voucher system for supplemental support to the dependent elderly which they could use within their own, their family's or well-financed community homes, hence giving many grown children the ability to afford to keep their parents in the home without fear of resulting financial destitution, while giving to the parents the financial security to be able to make the choice as to where to live their senior years.

Because these are practical, "external" programs it should be emphasized that these are only examples of steps that can be taken to build a pro-family reality. Congressional liberals must be careful to not reduce the focus to one of simple legislative remedies, but to talk to the underlying emotional realities. Liberals would do more to solve the problems in family life if they help people understand that these are shared and not just individual problems, problems that are rooted in the way we have built our competitive and self-interested society. If liberals dedicate time, money and energy to a serious campaign that attempts to undermine self-blaming and build compassion, to nurture ethical vision and promote real communities of caring—they will earn the respect and gratitude of the American people in a much deeper way than if all they do is to pass a few good pieces of legislation.

3. Together with liberals in state legislatures and city councils, Congressional liberals should promote the creation of local hearings in every neighborhood, where people can begin to discuss the real problems they are facing in daily life—with particular focus on the relationship between work and family life. Congressional hearings can highlight these activities, but liberals on the local level must be prepared to carry through and sustain on-going hearings aimed at helping people define for themselves what are the shared problems in family life, the world of work, and other aspects of daily life. The goal here is not simply to generate legislative remedies, though this can be one aspect; the message must be one which emphasizes the self-activity of local communities as well, one that focuses on the ways people can provide support for each other, learn from each others' experiences, and together build fami-
ily-support systems in their own communities. Most importantly, these local activities should increase awareness of the commonality of family problems and of the ways that our shared pains are themselves in part a product of a social order that promotes selfishness instead of love.

4. Presidential candidates should make their 1988 campaign focus on two themes: a.) A vision of a moral American community. Such a vision should be idealistic and not pragmatic. It should paint a picture of what life should be, and insist that practical programs must be measured by the degree to which they tend towards creating this kind of a society. Within this context, the Democrats should critique the conservatives' commitment to endless military spending and a reliance on the threat of nuclear war, the moral bankruptcy of support for the Contras, the moral failure of the Reagan years to adequately support Blacks in South Africa, the moral catastrophe of redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich that conservative policy leads to. Let television ads focus on these issues and pose to people the question: What kind of a society do you want? One that is morally sensitive and caring, or one that promotes selfishness and insensitivity to others? If the Democrats resist the pressure to be narrowly programmatic and insist on discussing fundamental underlying principles, they can receive a mandate for serious liberal change.

b.) A pro-family campaign that articulates specific pro-family programs but does not reduce itself to that. Instead, using the analysis developed here of what really causes pain in family life, liberal Presidential candidates should challenge the conservatives' strategy of scapegoating, and should talk about the psychic wounds that people experience in the world of work—and how that undermines family life. This kind of approach, of course, will offend the pundits and the "experts" who will, at first, be furiously writing op-ed articles about how the candidates are avoiding the issues. But the liberal who ignores the normal boring conventions of "respectable" politics and gets to the fundamental moral and emotional issues will ultimately win a responsive hearing from the American people.

5. No one will take seriously a pro-family shift by the liberals unless this move is done not as a momentary flurry to win an election but as part of a serious rethinking of liberal values. The Democrats should sponsor community forums and public discussions aimed at stimulating that discourse. They should challenge the popular notion, enshrined in pop psychology and liberal ideology, that the healthy person is the isolated person who has learned to be autonomous and not dependent on others, the person who can stand alone, facing the world as the courageous individual who, if s/he fancies, may connect with others. We should instead insist that ontological priority goes to the human being in relationship to others, and that the very essence of being human is to be in relationship. The healthy human being is one who can allow him/herself to be vulnerable to others and who is not afraid of being in need and mutually interdependent with the human community, as long as that community is based on democracy and mutuality of respect. The liberals should create think-tanks and teach-ins, promote journals and magazines and use the media to help develop this kind of understanding.

It is easy to understand why Democrats and liberals will find this kind of advice somewhat difficult to accept in the Spring of 1987. The punctures in the Reagan balloon appear so critical that they may bring down any Republican candidate in 1988—and this thinking may lead Democrats to feel that they shouldn't rock the boat by pursuing new directions, but precisely because electoral victory may be more likely in 1988, it is important that Democrats attempt to use the opportunity to get a real mandate for a liberal program, and not just be forced into continuing Reaganism under a different name. It is particularly critical for liberals to seize this opportunity, because now they can speak to the American people with a moral authority that they had previously squandered under Carter. Yet if all that they offer is more of the same, they may only succeed in recrediting the politics that Reagan's moral blunders in Iran and Nicaragua have temporarily put into question with the majority of the American people. If ever there was a time for a new vision of politics, this is the moment. The liberals can succeed in creating a new agenda and a new balance in American politics. To do so now requires the kind of serious rethinking of fundamentals that has been described herein.

4 Two caveats: First, liberals will rightly resist any attempt to define one "correct" model of family life, and insist that gay families and alternative families, insofar as they represent freely chosen alternatives and not simply accommodations to a bad reality, also deserve our respect. Second, we will resist any attempt to pressure people to enter relationships to be socially acceptable, or to stay in bad relationships that cannot be improved. Love requires choice, and we must create support systems for singles and for people leaving relationships, so that when people do enter families they do so not through subtle societal manipulations, but as a result of real loving choices. It is because we are pro-family that we must strongly resist any societal messages that put people down for being single or suggest that people are wrong to get divorced.

Yet we also reject any notion that being in a long-term loving relationship is just one possible choice among many equally valuable lifestyles. Human beings fundamentally need and are most fully realized within such relationships, and while we should avoid stigmatizing those who have not found them, we should see that the difficulty in finding and sustaining these relationships is one of the great indictments of our form of social organization.