

Our Imagined Families: The Myths and Rituals We Live By

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In her recent book, Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses, Marjorie Garber takes note of the strange turn of events that has made the contemporary house into a space of vicarious experience rather than a place for actual living. “We build exercise rooms instead of exercising, furnish libraries instead of reading, install professional kitchens instead of cooking.” She observes that space has become a substitute for time, “and the house becomes the un-lived life...the place where we stage the life we wish we had time to live.”ⁱ

Garber is talking about the privileged few who can afford big houses and second homes, but what is striking is that the group that we used to call the leisured class feels itself just as short on time as the rest of us. What distinguishes them from us, however, is that they can afford to substitute space for time, building houses where dreams of the good life can be preserved, even if not actually achieved.

Family has also become something we wish we had time for. When asked what they desire most, Americans invariably say it is not money but time, and especially time for family.ⁱⁱ Family has also taken on a vicarious character, in which time itself – in particular, special family times – have become a substitute for the real time we feel we no longer have to spend with family. If the house has become a stage, family has become a performance, produced for an audience consisting largely of families themselves.

Family life today differs profoundly from family two hundred years ago, not only in those things that can be easily pinned down and measured, like size and composition, but in the cultural practices that come to constitute living a good family life. Over the past two hundred years the meaning of family has been radically transformed from a group of people one lives *with* in the here and now to an imagined entity we live *by* through either a remembered past or a dreamed of future. Just as home has become virtual, something that, according to Garber, “is best perceived at a distance,” so family has also become something vicariously experienced in the there and then, kept, like all those things we wish to keep safe from the depredations of modern time and space, at a distance.ⁱⁱⁱ

We live in a “century of dreams,” when, according to Donald Lowe, “The Family is a highly important and useful imaginary...More than a sign, it is an image that can arouse culturally constructed nostalgia and longing...The family is an integral part of the culture of late capitalism.”^{iv} Family has become a brand name. A quick finger walk through my central New Jersey Yellow Pages yielded the following uses: Family Buffet, Family Carpets, Family Dentistry, Family Dollar Stores, Family Game Rooms, Family Pet Veterinary, and more.

I am less concerned here with the commercial uses of imagined families than with the ways in which families themselves create and live by their own imaginaries. I hope to convince you that a substantial dimension of family life today is experienced as dream. Our dream families can be, like the dream house, anticipatory, but they are just as likely to be memorial, because, as our sense of the future has become increasingly impoverished, the past has become the preferred space of the family imaginary, making memory the dominant muse of our time.^v It has become the safest storage for the virtual families on which contemporary families have become so reliant. Tonight I want to explore how and why our families, like our houses, have become locations of un-lived lives, the families we wish we could have if only we had the time and the room for them.

Some would argue that our current condition is the product of the eclipse of the nuclear family. Indeed, the census takers have found that the percentage of American households consisting of married adults with children at home is down from 40% in 1970

to 26% in 1997. The percentage of households with only a single occupant has risen from 15% in 1960 to over 30% today.^{vi} This trend has been described by some as “end of the line decline” of family life itself.^{vii} But, wait a minute! Is family the same as household? Take my own family demographic. I work and live in New Jersey; for fourteen years, my wife has worked and lived in California. We are counted as singles, though we have been married for forty two years. Clearly, census of households does not even come close to capturing American family life today.

Houses are getting ever bigger and ever emptier.^{viii} Already in the nineteenth century, the household was saying goodbye to unrelated persons – apprentices, live-in workers, male servants. The next to exit were the men of the house, who spent their days working somewhere else, coming home only in the evening. They were followed by the children when compulsory schooling removed them during the day. And now it is the turn of married women. Family is no longer at home, but does this mean that its ties no longer bind? Hardly! Family no longer requires physical presence. Parents at work flood the phone lines at 3 PM checking on their kids.^{ix} And families are increasingly located in cyberspace.^x

“Home” has also become detached from the household, acquiring, like family, a mental location separate from physical space. House is no longer home in an era when, in the words of Arlie Hochschild, work has become home and home has become work.^{xi} But there has never been an era when the people share real time and real space with have been exclusively family. The picture of the preindustrial family gathered around the hearth is pure mythology, invented by a modern age in need of a reassuring image of the possibility of family togetherness.^{xii}

The families we live *with* today may be smaller, more fragmented and temporary, but the families we live *by* are larger, more cohesive and permanent now than at any time in the recent past. We need to think of family not as a “functioning system, but a meaningful system.”^{xiii} It is when we free ourselves from the narrow categories of real time and real space that we begin to see the true dimensions of contemporary family life.

I

There was a time, the preindustrial era before 1800, when household defined family, when the functions of a small business or small farm defined family relations. Family as household was a matter of real time and real space. It included not only those related by birth or marriage, but unrelated co-residents, all regarded as family. The typical eighteenth century household was a thing of the moment, without much sense of its own past or future, with a profound sense of being, but little sense of becoming. In an era when a sense of place was far more important to identity than a sense of time, dreams and memories were more of an obstacle than an asset to the smooth operations of the household.

But all this was to change with the onset of the industrial revolution, which not only separated family from household, but altered the meaning of family from something existing exclusively in the here and now to something that occupying larger spans of both time and space. Family acquired a future and and past; and “home” became something other than residence. This was the feature of modernity that the sociologist Anthony Giddens has called the “disembedding process,” defined as “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of social interaction and their restructuring across infinite spans of time-space.”^{xiv} By the mid-nineteenth century families were exposed to the relentless acceleration of linear time, which distanced the present from both the past and the future, rendering it fleeting and disorienting.

At the same time, the emptiness of modern space terminated that ancient sense of place that had given meaning to life in the pre-industrial household.

What David Harvey has called modern "time-space compression" initially produced a sense of time famine and agoraphobia, but it also occasioned a number of creative responses that had a profound impact on modern family life.^{xv} From the mid-nineteenth century onwards the European and American middle classes began to construct a raft of new family time(s) and places to cope with their experience of lost time and space.^{xvi} We usually think of family as passive, responding to change, not as a creative force in its own right. Yet the Victorians took up the challenge presented by the alienating powers of modern time and space, and turned both to their own purposes. The same means of rapid communication, such as the steamship and the railway, that tore the household asunder made it possible for people to remain in touch with and to visit relations who in earlier periods would have been out of sight and therefore out of mind. The modern triumph of time over space has made it possible for us to think of ourselves as "close" to persons not only at ever greater spatial but temporal distances.^{xvii}

One of the novel features of modernity is the possibility of combining presence with absence, bringing the distant near and drawing the past and future into the present. Modern technology, beginning with the telegraph and culminating in the internet, allows persons to be intimate at a distance. Photography and now video erase barriers of time as well as space, so that contemporary family life depends no more on propinquity than it does on contemporaneity.

A world mapped by a single set of abstract universal coordinates empties all places of their original meaning, but this modern mental feat also makes available to us places we have never seen and may never visit, opening up to the imagination places and people beyond the horizons of our ancestors. "In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric," Giddens notes.^{xviii} And for almost two centuries Americans and Europeans have been in the process of creating a whole new set of imagined places that now constitute their mental, if not their physical worlds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the changing meaning of "home," which is now less a physical location than a mental construct, a thing of dreams as well as memories, present even in its absence, no less real even if it is rarely, sometimes never, actually inhabited.^{xix}

Having thus been disembedded, we have gained a much larger measure of freedom to place ourselves in the world. Our families are no longer confined to those we live with. Our potential circle of kin has been vastly expanded to the point that we can begin to imagine ourselves a part of a "family of man."^{xx} In reality, the circle of those with whom we are on familiar terms is much more constricted, yet the boundaries of family are no longer limited by physical place. Because family can now be anywhere, it has become incumbent on families to make their own sense of place, another one of the peculiar features of our modern age. In a homeless world, home is something everyone must construct for themselves.

II

Modernity has also disembedded us from older meanings of time with the result that it too has become phantasmagoric. However much we may be subject to the dictates of the modern clock and calendar, modernity's separation of time from space has allowed us a greater opportunity to create new modes of temporality that serve to calm the terrors of linear time through the restoration of cycles of events (such as birthdays and anniversaries) that provide for us a sense of continuity and permanence. Even as those who live together feel they have less and less time for one another, the number and variety of special occasions set

aside for family continues to grow at an astonishing rate.^{xxi} Just as our mental maps are filled with family places, so our mental calendars are crowded with the anticipations and memories of family occasions.

In fact, most of the time we spend on family gatherings is in anticipation and remembering rather than on the actual moment itself. When it comes to family, the modern imagination works overtime, producing a plethora of dream and memory. Our highly theatrical family occasions are carefully planned and minutely directed, assigning to each family member a highly demanding role according to age and gender. They are “productions,” command performances before a discerning, often critical audience made up the family itself. Scripted as “tradition,” they allow little improvisation.

Above all else, family times are highly ritualized. Ritual allows us to seize upon the ineffable passing moment, turning this into a symbol of duration and extension, defying time and space, even death, to create a sense of meaningful continuity. In modern future-oriented societies, ritual is supposed to disappear, yet it is through ritual that we make the future probable and possible. Ritual time differs from linear time not just in its repetitiveness, but in the way it erases the perceived distance between past, present, and future. As Barbara Myerhoff put it: "Ritual inevitably carries a basic message of order, continuity, and predictability.... By stating enduring and underlying patterns, ritual connects, past, present, and future, abrogating history and time. Ritual always links participants to one another and often beyond, to wider collectivities that may be absent, even to the ancestors and those yet unborn."^{xxii}

III

Ritual depends on memory and memory first entered into family life in the mid-nineteenth century as a compensatory device to counter the centrifugal effects of linear time.^{xxiii} Memory practices such as genealogy had long been cultivated by aristocratic elites, but did not appeal to the middle classes until the Victorian period. Since that time documenting ancestors and constructing family trees has become a kind of mania.

Just this past summer, an article in the New York Times entitled “Vacationing with Ancestors,” reported on the surge of visits to local libraries and record offices. Ancestor hunting has become big business; and a company called Matrix Marketing Company found that 60 percent of Americans “were at least somewhat interested in tracing their origins, up from 45 percent in 1995.” Thirty percent had already constructed family trees, many using software like the Broderbund Family Tree Maker. But finding ancestors no longer requires leaving home. The Mormon Church’s web site FamilySearch.org, with its data base of almost a billion names, gets more than eight million hits a day, helping to make genealogical sites second only to sex sites in the number of documented visitors.^{xxiv} Like houses, families have taken on a erotic charge; and distance – in this case temporal distance -- only seems to make the heart grow fonder

It was in the mid-nineteenth century that families began to haunt their dead. Family, previously largely neglected, were visited regularly as the Victorian cemetery was redesigned to make room for weekly and annual pilgrimages.^{xxv} Never had mourning been so attenuated and the memory of the dead kept alive for so long, a task assigned mainly to women.^{xxvi} Women were also favored mediums in the spiritualist movements which were to become so much a part of middle class family life from the middle of the century onwards.^{xxvii}

Memory is modernity's favorite muse. We are surrounded by commemorative practices, all decked as as time-honored tradition, but most of quite recent origin. It was in the nineteenth century that birthdays came to be commemorated. The christening became for the first time a major familial gathering; and children's birthdays began to be celebrated with regularity. Child-centered holidays – like Christmas – came to dominate the calendar. Rites of passage, which had not been strongly accentuated in preindustrial society, also took on huge significance. Confirmations, bar mitzvahs, and graduations also became major family occasions. But the most memorial event of all was marriage, now complete with newly invented wedding rituals invariably presenting themselves as “traditional,” together with the novel practice of anniversaries.^{xxviii}

Inseparable from all these events was the photograph.^{xxix} "Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery," writes Susan Sontag, whose insight into the role of images in family life is worth quoting at greater length:^{xxx}

"As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family -- and, often, is all that remains of it."

From the 1850s family photography has focused on children, primarily on female children, who functioned for Victorian male photographers a kind of psychological recovery project for a generation, including Lewis Carroll, obsessed with their own lost childhoods.^{xxxi} Today seventy percent of our Kodak moments are devoted to "cute" little boys as well as pretty little girls, but the psychological function of family photography has not changed. It remains compensatory, a kind of dreaming. Daniel Harris suggests that that "cuteness is every parent's portable utopia, the rose-colored lenses that color and blur the profound drudgery of child-rearing with soft-focused sentimentality."^{xxxii}

IV

In previous ages public space was people's aide de memoire.^{xxxiii} In the course of the nineteenth century public spaces progressively lost the "placeness" that had allowed them to serve as sites of memory. But Victorians created a new sense of place in the home itself, reconstructing the house in such a way as make it a locus of commemoration.^{xxxiv} Memories abhor empty spaces, and, Victorian architecture served memory particularly well, for, in the words of Gaston Bachelard, if a house "has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated."^{xxxv}

Closed domestic spaces would henceforth bear the weight of modern dreaming. By the late 19th century, the parlor had become "a kind of museum or sanctum - the repository of things which have, or which once had, an emotional significance: wedding dresses and other old clothes some belonging to the departed..."^{xxxvi} The parlor was where the dead were laid out, but it was also the place for all those events -- courtships,

weddings, christenings, and, of course, Christmas -- which were meant to be memorable, when the past was invoked as "tradition" and ritual brought the past imaginatively into the present, thereby opening the way to the imagined future.

In the twentieth century every man's and woman's home became both their castle and their dream house. Today, every home has become a museum and an archive filled with things that speak to that which is absent. Because homes and the homey things that fill them are "repositories of personal and collective memories, they embody kinship ties, they are valued as tangible evidence of friendship and family bonds, they are signs of our presence in a paradoxically material yet evanescent world."^{xxxvii}

In the late twentieth century, as modern domestic architecture took on some of empty functionalism characteristic of modern space more generally, memory tended to migrate to summer or weekend houses. Today's dream house is more likely to be a second home, where, notes Marjorie Garber, "the lost origin and the future dream are both vanishing points where we imagine ourselves at peace, surrounded by comfort and harmony."^{xxxviii}

Today most of us fasten on one place to call home, that one place where we feel we can animate meaningful, habitable worlds. There we gather our significant others, or, in their absence, their photos, mementos, and other cherished objects that connect us to them on the symbolic level. They speak to us, and we to them. Research has shown that "transactions with cherished objects are communicative dialogues with ourselves."^{xxxix} As more and more of us live alone, we fill our empty nests with things that allow us to connect with more people than our ancestors ever knew existed. It is even common to turn pets and stuffed animals into surrogate families.^{xl} Our fondness for things should not be mistaken for materialism, however, for without objects to symbolize ourselves and our significant others our world would lose all meaning.^{xli}

That one special place we call home has become increasingly virtual. We are so rarely at home these days; and our hurried existence means that the "homemade" and the "home cooked" is likely to be made anywhere but at home. Again, Marjorie Garber offers some perceptive insights: "We have entered into a world of virtual home-owning and virtual design, seeking to create in days and weeks -- indeed on the Internet in seconds and minutes -- traditions in the absence of history."^{xlii}

V

What the imagined home is to the everyday house, the family occasion is to mundane time with family. At those moments the actual time spent is far less important than the accompanying symbolic activity. For it is at these moments, usually staged in places purpose built for the occasion, that families represent themselves to themselves, acting out ideals. Increasingly, these ideals are drawn from the past, presented to us as "tradition" despite their recent origins. Family occasions are precious moments we seize from fleeting linear time to break out of our present preoccupations, allowing us to imagine a past that will see us through into our imagined future. "The novelty of the very future demands a novel past," George Herbert Mead noted in 1902; and recently social psychologists have found that people whose pasts run deepest have the greatest faith in their futures.^{xliii} It turns out that our ability to imagine the future depends very heavily on our capacity to create "images of absent events and believe in their validity."^{xliv} We

require the presence of things past to ensure the presence of things future, but, of course, when remembering becomes an end in itself, it becomes "mere nostalgia, it degenerates into a terminal bubble of past that both closes one off from the living spontaneity of the present and denies the possibility of a future."^{xlv}

Even as we speak, new rituals proliferate.^{xlvi} Until recently, small children have served as the prime symbols of family. But, in this age of the "hurried child," when children are not allowed to linger even in their infancy, the fetal image of the "unborn child" has appeared to satisfy our craving for proof of the immortality of family relations. Viewing ultrasound images, existing outside of real time and space, and thus exempt from the imperfections that birth itself may bring, has become the latest rite of family.^{xlvii}

The annual, weekly, even the daily cycles of modern life provide people who usually have precious little real time to share with a common past and future. Drawn together in anticipation and remembrance, families seek to find in this virtual interaction what they do not find in daily life. Often enough, the actual family meals, vacations, and reunions prove disappointing, resulting in what is commonly diagnosed as "holiday trauma."^{xlviii} Yet this only seems to intensify our yearning for the perfect family moment.

Family rituals always seem to disappoint us because at those moments we encounter parents, children, and kin their most stereotypical roles, thus producing a terrible yearning for an intimacy that cannot be. These highly scripted events produce great anxiety and sometimes violence.^{xlix} "Our ideology of what family time is leaves us in an unhappy present," notes Kerry Daly, "The past and the future maintain the dream of family time, but the present is the site of our disillusionment."^l The level of performance expected is constantly being raised, producing that sense of inadequacy that commercial interests are quick to exploit for profit. Good family time has become yet another commodity to be catered or outsourced. Packaged as "family," experiences are sold back to us as substitute for the real thing.

VI

"Time's arrow is the intelligibility of distinct and irreversible events, while time's cycle is the intelligibility of timeless order and law-like structure. We must have both," writes Stephen J. Gould.^{li} As T.S. Eliot observed, "only through time, time is conquered"^{lii} We have learned to live vicariously through family myths and rituals, through our "ghostly traces," relying more and more on imagination. Every day we move between zones of linear and cyclical time, using dream and memory as compensation for our perceived losses.^{liii} It is when we stop moving between past, present, and future, when the past becomes an end in itself, that memory ceases to be a creative resource and becomes the paralytic condition diagnosed as nostalgia. It is important, therefore, that we always remind ourselves that, as Edmund Bolles has put it, "remembering and imagining are of one piece," for we must learn to live with multiple temporalities -- history and heritage, linear and cyclical time, rationalism and ritual -- if we are to make for ourselves a world that is sustainable, but at the same time meaningful.

But there is the danger that in dwelling so much on other times and other places we render both houses and family into what Garber calls an "unlived life." In a culture of dream and memory, reality can take its revenge and dreams can easily turn into

nightmares. We have all had the experience of the perfect occasion becoming the ultimate disaster.

Our sacralization of family time and space entails an enormous burden. Our ancestors knew better than to impute divine properties to domestic life. They were careful to project the ideal beyond this world, imputing perfection only to gods and saints, and locating sacred places far from home. The original meaning of utopia, a term coined by Sir Thomas More at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was a good place that was also nowhere. It was only in the nineteenth century that utopia became a somewhere or a sometime, with all the attendant frustrations and disappointments that have accompanied modern effort to find perfection closer to home. As a result of the idealization of our homes and families, we find ourselves forever dissatisfied, forever air brushing our memories, perpetually reliving rather than simply living our family lives.

How can we get beyond this exhausting cycle? Toni Morrison has a radical suggestion:^{liv}

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes
enough. You don't need to photograph, paint,
or even remember it. It is enough. No record
of it needs to be kept, and you don't need
someone to share it with or tell it to. When
that happens -- that letting go -- you let go
because you can.

This is an intriguing idea, but letting go means taking on the matrix of modern time and space that is the cause of so many of our discontents. In this era of speedup and overwork, of globalization and rampant rootlessness, it is difficult to find even the time to consider radical alternatives. In the short term, perhaps the best we can do is remind ourselves that the times and places we now associate with family are the product of history, and, as such, subject to historical change, if only we can summon the will to make those changes.

Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱ Juliet Schor, The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, New York: Basic Books, 1991, p.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Garber, p. 118.
- ^{iv} Notion of “century of dreams” is John Neubauer’s, quoted in Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature, New York: Free Press, 2001, p. 450; Donald Lowe, The Body in Late-Capitalist USA, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 102.
- ^v Raphael Samuel has written: "In place of a better future, we use as our critical vantage point a more immediately accessible past, and it is to make-believe identities in the past rather than the future that we look to find a home for our own ideal selves. The return to history, under this optic, appears a displaced expression of contemporary utopianism." "The Return to History," in his Island Stories: Unravelling Britain, London, Verso, 1998, p. 221.
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- ^{viii} Tracie Rozhon, “Be It Ever Less Humble: American Homes Get Bigger,” New York Times, October 23, 2000, p. WK5
- ^{ix} Lisa Balkin, “The Furtive 3 P.M. Phone Ritual,” The New York Times, October 23, 2000, p. G1.
- ^x Rebecca Fairly Raney, “Study Finds Internet of Social Benefit to Users,” New York Times, May 11, 2000.
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- xvii. Ibid, p. 142.
- xviii. Ibid, pp. 18-19. Emphasis is the author's.
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- xx. Alex Shoumatoff, The Mountain of Names: A History of the Human Family, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985.
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- xxiii. There is a prior memorial practice of the European aristocracies. See Philippe Aries and George Duby, eds., A History of Private Life, iii, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- xxiv. Peter J. Kilburn, "In Libraries and Cemeteries, Vacationing with Ancestors," New York Times, August 19, 2001, pp. 1, 24.
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- xxvi. Gillis, "The Cultural Production of Family Identities," unpublished paper, Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, 1989, pp. 18_22; Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death, New York: Vintage, 1981, pp. 510_43.
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- lii. Quoted in Harvey, p. 206.
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- liv. Toni Morrison, "Let Go," Utne Reader Almanac, Minneapolis: Utne Reader Press, 1996, p. 93.