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HUMAN FLOURISHING  
SEVEN PILLARS  
ESSAY

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# The First Circle

*Family, Community, and the Ground Floor  
of Flourishing*

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**F**amily is the first thing that happened to you. Before you had a name for it. Before you had a name at all. The people who were near you in those earliest years shaped the person you became, often without meaning to and often without you knowing it was happening. The ones who showed up. The ones who didn't.

This is what family does, before it does anything else. Long before there were ceremonies or property deeds, there were children whose lives took the shape of the adults who were near them. There still are.

## A Note Before We Begin

Family is not the same word for everyone. For some, it carries warmth. For others, weight that has taken years to learn how to hold. Many readers grew up in families that did not give them what they needed. Many have wanted children and could not have them. Many have built a family of their own choosing because the one they were given was not safe to come home to. None of this disqualifies anyone from a serious conversation about family. Often it makes them the wisest voices in it.

How human beings came to be is a question different traditions answer differently. Some readers will place the deep history that follows inside an account of evolutionary biology; others, inside a sacred narrative that begins with a Creator. This essay does not adjudicate that question. What follows is a tracing of what archaeologists, anthropologists, demographers, and social scientists have learned about how families have been organized across cultures and across time — and what that record can tell us about the conditions under which human beings flourish.

Read with whatever you carry in. You belong here.

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# Where We Stand

This essay has a position. The most consistent finding in social science across cultures and continents is that children flourish when they are raised inside a committed partnership between two adults — rooted in love and mutual accountability — embedded in a wider web of extended family, friendship, and community. That finding is held lightly enough to follow the evidence wherever it goes, and firmly enough not to pretend the data is mixed when it is not. What follows is not an ideological brief. It is a tracing of what the historical record, the global data, and the long arc of human experience suggest about the conditions under which families — and the people inside them — actually flourish.

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## *Part 1*

# The Family Across Time

## *Cooperative From the Beginning*

Human children are uniquely helpless at birth and remain dependent for an extraordinarily long time — the biological cost of our enormous, slow-developing brains. No single pair of adults could carry that demand alone. From the deep past forward, the human family appears in the archaeological and anthropological record as a cooperative network: grandmothers, siblings, aunts, uncles, and community members all helping to raise the young. Evolutionary biologists call this cooperative breeding, and it appears to be among the defining features of how our species survived and spread.

## *The Agricultural Turn*

The shift to agriculture, beginning roughly ten thousand years ago, changed almost everything. When people stopped moving and started settling, land became wealth. Wealth required inheritance. Inheritance required certainty about parentage. Much of what later societies would call traditional family structure began, in significant part, as an accounting system for property — patrilineal lineages, arranged marriages, dowries, bride prices.

That observation does not make those structures cynical. People across millennia have found genuine love and meaning inside arrangements that began with practical concerns. But the historical record shows that family structures have varied considerably across cultures and ecologies. Family has always been an adaptive institution as well as a foundational one.

### *The Nuclear Family Is Older Than We Tend to Think*

The nuclear household — a couple and their children living in their own home — is not a modern industrial invention. In northwestern Europe, this pattern is visible as early as the medieval period: young couples establishing independent households after marriage, generations before the factories arrived. The Industrial Revolution accelerated the pattern globally. As people moved into cities for wage work, extended family networks were left behind. The household shrank, gained privacy, and took on new emotional weight as the primary unit of belonging in a world that had grown larger and more anonymous around it.

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## *Part II*

# A World in Transition

The pace and direction of change in family life today are unlike anything in the historical record. Across nearly every region of the world, the same forces are at work: rising education, urbanization, economic development, and shifting cultural values are reshaping family formation with remarkable speed.

### *The Western World*

In the United States, the share of adults who are married has fallen from about 72 percent in 1960 to under half today. Four in ten births now occur outside of marriage. The share of children living with two married parents has dropped from 87 percent in 1960 to about 63 percent today. Single-person households are rising in almost every developed nation, exceeding 40 percent in countries like Sweden, Norway, and Germany.

What the data show clearly, and what most public discussion sidesteps, is the class dimension. The retreat from marriage and stable family formation is concentrated among Americans with less education and lower incomes. College-educated Americans largely still marry, stay married, and raise children in two-parent households. The Americans who would benefit most from the stability committed family structures provide are increasingly the ones who do not have access to them.

### *East Asia: A Fertility Collapse*

South Korea has the world's lowest total fertility rate — 0.72 in 2023, ticking up to 0.75 in 2024 and remaining far below the 2.1 needed to sustain a population. Japan, China, and Taiwan are not far behind. In cultures where marriage and childbearing remain tightly linked — fewer than 6 percent of South Korean births occur outside marriage — a collapse in marriage rates means a collapse in births. The drivers are familiar: housing costs

that put homeownership out of reach, education expenses that consume household budgets, and a stark career-or-family choice that falls disproportionately on women.

South Korea has spent more than \$270 billion on pro-natalist incentives over the past two decades. The fertility rate has barely moved. Economic intervention alone cannot substitute for the cultural and relational conditions that make family formation feel possible.

### *Africa and the Global South: The Network Holds*

Sub-Saharan Africa remains demographically distinct. Birth rates and marriage rates are high, and extended family networks are deeply embedded in daily life. In South Africa, fewer than 30 percent of children live with both biological parents — many are raised within networks of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. This is not dysfunction. It is community. The proverb that it takes a village to raise a child reflects an actual social reality, not a slogan.

Even here, modernization is pulling toward smaller, more nuclear structures. Development tends to atomize family structure. Whether that atomization is an inevitable cost of progress or a problem to be intentionally addressed is one of the questions this essay sits with.

### *The Middle East and South Asia*

The regions with the lowest rates of single parenthood globally are the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern Europe — places where religious and cultural norms continue to anchor family formation. Even there, the age of first marriage is rising, fertility is declining, and urbanization is eroding extended family networks. The convergence is not inevitable, but its directional pull is unmistakable.

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## *Part III*

# What the Family Does

The data show what is happening to families. They do not show what families are for. To answer that, the essay has to slow down and look at what happens inside a family, especially in the years when a person is being formed.

You cannot pour water from an empty vessel. The saying is older than any of us, and it points at something the research has confirmed across multiple disciplines: a self that has not been received cannot give. A self that has never been held in the steady, particular love of someone who knew them does not learn, easily or sometimes ever, how to extend that love to others.

The infant who learns that their cries will be answered is developing the neurological foundation for trust. The boy who learns that his tantrum will be met by a steady adult who does not collapse is learning that his feelings are real and survivable. The teenager given increasing responsibility, and held accountable for what they do with it, is becoming a person capable of carrying their own life. Each of these is happening inside the family — first, and most. None of it is visible in the moment. All of it shows up, decades later, in the kind of adult that child becomes.

### *What the Evidence Says*

Research across cultures and continents has converged on a consistent finding: children raised in stable, committed two-parent households are more likely, on average, to flourish across nearly every measurable dimension. They have better academic outcomes, better mental health, better economic mobility, lower rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, and stronger relationships of their own as adults. The effect sizes vary, the confounding variables are real, and average differences hide enormous variation within groups. But the basic finding has been replicated often enough, across enough populations, that it is no longer seriously contested in the social science literature.

The finding is about stability and committed care, not about a single fixed family form. Children raised by adoptive parents, by grandparents, by single parents who have built a stable web of support around them, by chosen families that became family in every way that matters — these children can and do flourish. What the research keeps pointing at is not a particular configuration but a particular quality: the reliable, sustained, loving presence of adults who show up for the children in their care.

Stable family formation is also a precondition for civilizational continuity. The math is the math. When fertility falls well below replacement and stays there, an aging population eventually overwhelms the working-age population that has to support it. Pension systems strain. Healthcare systems strain. Workforces shrink. The countries furthest along this curve — Japan, South Korea, Italy, Spain, increasingly the United States — are running an experiment whose later chapters have not yet been written.

### *On Marriage Specifically*

Marriage deserves a closer look than the data alone can give it. In nearly every culture that has developed the institution, marriage has been understood as something more than a relationship. It is a public, witnessed, voluntary, and lifelong commitment between two people — a structure that shapes the relationship rather than simply describing it. The public part matters: marriage is the form in which a couple announces, in front of their community, that the relationship is no longer a private experiment. The witnessed part matters: those who watched the vows are part of how the vows hold. The voluntary part matters: marriage is a freely chosen yoke. And the lifelong part matters: the intent of staying changes how a couple navigates everything that arrives.

A couple who has agreed to keep showing up across decades will weather the seasons of a marriage differently than a couple who has agreed to keep showing up while it works. They will fight differently. They will repair differently. They will look at each other across a hard year and decide, again, to stay — not because the year was easy but because staying was the commitment they made when they did not yet know what staying would cost.

What marriage at its best asks of two people is concrete. The willingness to share a direction even when you do not share the same opinion. The courage to be fully seen rather than performing a sanitized version of yourself. The trust that hands someone the map to your tender places. The discipline of growing alongside another person without losing the particular self you were when you began. The protection of joy and play even when life is heavy.

The data on marriage outcomes is consistent, even controlling for selection effects. People who marry, and stay married, generally do better across almost every dimension of human flourishing than those who do not, and so do the children they raise. That observation is offered without judgment of those whose marriages have ended, those whose marriages were never safe, those who have not married, or those whose paths have taken them through other forms of committed love. The work of building marriages well, and supporting the cultural conditions in which marriages can hold, is among the most consequential work a society does.

### *On Self-Interest, Properly Understood*

There is an old framing that places self-interest and concern for others on opposite sides of a moral ledger, as though caring for oneself and caring for others were competing claims on a finite store of attention. The framing distorts both, and it distorts what families actually do.

The deeper truth is harder and more useful. The self, properly developed, achieves its greatest interests through genuine care for others. The mother who has eaten and slept and tended her own inner life shows up for her children differently than the mother who has not. The leader whose health and marriage are not collapsing leads differently than the one whose are. The entrepreneur who builds something that genuinely serves others succeeds because of that service, not in spite of it. Care for self and care for others are not opposites. The first is what makes sustained love for others possible — and the act of loving others well is, in turn, where most adults discover the deepest version of themselves.

A child raised by adults who have not abandoned themselves learns that giving and receiving belong to the same exchange, not to opposing sides of one. He learns that becoming a fully formed person and being available for others are the same project, viewed from two angles. Adam Smith named this in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* two and a half centuries ago: human beings are constituted for fellow-feeling, and our enlightened interest in our own lives operates inside a moral community of mutual sympathy and reciprocal regard. The systems we build together — markets, civic life, the whole architecture of voluntary cooperation — work to the degree that we are people who care, fundamentally,

about being seen well by those we love and those we serve. The argument is older than Smith and lives on past him. The family is where it is first learned, or first lost.

*The deepest self-interest and genuine service to others are not opposites. They are the same act, viewed from two angles. The family is where most of us first learn this — or first lose the chance to.*

### ***Cycles, and the Work of Becoming***

Families form individuals. They do not always form them well. Some of the most extraordinary people you will ever meet came from families that were a wreck. Some of the most damaged came from families that looked, from the outside, beautiful. Family of origin shapes us, but it does not finish us. The capacity to look honestly at what we received, to receive what was good, to name what was harmful, to take responsibility for what we do with what we got — that capacity is itself part of human flourishing. It is also the work that breaks cycles.

Many readers know what this work looks like. The adult who chooses to raise her children differently than she was raised, even though she has no model for what she is reaching toward. The man who breaks a multi-generational pattern of addiction or violence by being the first in his line not to repeat it. The woman who forgives a parent who never apologized, not because the parent earned it but because she has decided not to carry the weight any further. None of these are exotic. They are happening, right now, inside ordinary lives.

The fact that family of origin is powerful is not a sentence on anyone's future. It is a description of where the work begins.

### ***The Family as Training Ground***

The capacities a flourishing society depends on are first rehearsed inside families. How to disagree without leaving. How to forgive. How to be wrong, apologize, and stay in the room. How to be loved even when you are not at your best. How to take an interest in someone whose interior life is different from yours. How to share. How to wait. These are the muscles of civic life, and they are built — when they are built — in the daily friction and reconciliation of life inside a family.

The civic decline so visible in our public square is not separate from the decline of stable family formation. It is, in significant part, the same decline. This is part of why Human Flourishing was founded.

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*Part IV*

## The Division That Comes Home

There is a force fracturing families today that the evolutionary record and the demographic data do not fully capture, and it may be the most urgent of all. It is the subject of the founding essay, and it belongs in this one.

A family that is economically stable and structurally intact can still be quietly torn apart by the epistemological civil war happening around it. When two people in a marriage no longer share a basic understanding of what is real — when they get their information from different ecosystems, trust different institutions, and inhabit different versions of the same news cycle — they cannot share a life together in the way that family requires. Parents and adult children stop calling. Siblings unfollow each other. Holidays grow quieter every year. The damage shows up at the kitchen table before it shows up anywhere else.

Healing the family and healing the civic divide are not separate projects. They are the same project, pursued from the inside out. The work Human Flourishing is building — practicing dialogue across difference, operating from wisdom and love rather than fear, choosing curiosity over contempt — is as much a gift to families as it is to the public square.

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*Part V*

## Is Declining Fertility a Crisis or an Adaptation?

This question deserves to be held with genuine openness, because thoughtful people disagree about it, and the disagreement matters.

*The Case That Lower Fertility Is Progress*

There is a serious and humane argument that declining birth rates reflect human liberation. When women have access to education, economic independence, and reproductive choice, they tend to have fewer children. Fewer children, better resourced and more intentionally raised, may flourish more fully than many children raised in poverty and constraint. Some analysts argue that demographic stabilization in wealthy countries is environmentally manageable, economically navigable with the right policy adjustments, and on net a sign of social progress rather than decline.

### *The Case That It Is a Warning Signal*

When young people in South Korea describe themselves as the sampo generation — from the Korean sam-po sedae, the “three-giving-up generation,” referring to those who have given up on dating, marriage, and children — that is not flourishing. The term has expanded over the past decade into five-, seven-, and n-po versions, with each iteration adding more of what young people have given up on: home ownership, full-time jobs, friendships, hope. There is a difference between a society in which people choose smaller families from a position of abundance and a society in which family formation itself has become unaffordable, unsupported, and increasingly unimaginable. The second is not freedom. It is structural failure dressed in the language of choice.

The deeper question may not be how many children but under what conditions. Do the people who want families have genuine access to the conditions that make family formation viable? Is the choice not to have children a free expression of values, or a quiet surrender to a world that has made love and commitment feel too costly?

### *What the Data Doesn't Show*

The fertility data treats children as a demographic question. Most people who have had them know it is also something else.

Across nearly every culture and tradition humanity has produced, having children has been understood as one of the central tasks of an adult life — not the only path, but a path that asks of a person what no other path quite asks. Most people who become parents do choose to. What no parent chooses is the particular human being who arrives — their temperament, their needs, the specific shape of who they will turn out to be. The work of raising that particular child requires the surrender of significant portions of one's autonomy, comfort, sleep, money, attention, and self-concern, in service of a person whose unfolding life the parent cannot fully control. That surrender is, in most traditions, framed as formative for the adult as much as for the child. The parent becomes someone they would not otherwise have become.

This is not the only path to a fully lived life. Some readers grieve the absence of children they wanted and never had. Some have made considered decisions not to become parents. Some have chosen other forms of generative work — teaching, mentoring, caregiving, building institutions that will outlast them — and the moral seriousness of those callings is not in question. What this section names is simply that the question of whether to have children has historically been understood as a question about more than fertility math. It is a question about what kind of life one is being shaped into, what one is being asked to give, and what one is being asked to receive.

The work of raising a child is also the work of becoming a person capable of pouring water from a vessel that keeps having to refill itself. It builds, in the parent, exactly the capacities this essay has been describing: presence, patience, the ability to hold complexity without collapsing, the muscle of staying when leaving would be easier. None of this is

exclusive to biological parenthood. Adoptive parents, stepparents, grandparents raising grandchildren, and the chosen-family aunts and uncles who show up across decades all do this work. The point is that the work itself shapes the worker, and that is part of why it matters.

*The question is not how many children a society has, but whether the people who want families can build them — and whether those who don't have made that choice freely.*

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## *Part VI*

# **Beyond the Family: Community and the Expanding Circles**

No family thrives in isolation. The question is what kind of community a family lives inside, and how that community is built.

## *The Village That Most of Us No Longer Have*

For most of human history, families were embedded inside villages — geographically bounded networks of relatives and neighbors who could see, feed, and be fed by each other. The cooperative breeding the deep history pointed to was happening every day, not as a theory but as a fact of life. Modern life has dismantled most of that. Families now live further from extended relatives than at any point in human history, and the institutions that once held communal life have weakened nearly everywhere. Families are being asked to do, alone, what families have never had to do alone before.

Religious communities deserve specific mention here, because they have historically been one of the strongest forms of village human beings have built, and their decline is one of the larger structural losses families have absorbed. Across the social science research, congregational life is one of the most consistent producers of social capital, intergenerational trust, and the kind of sustained, in-person, voluntary relationship that families benefit from being inside. A faith community at its best gives a family a wider set of adults who know its children, a rhythm of shared meaning that does not have to be invented every weekend, and a network of support that turns up when life is hard without having to be asked. None of that depends on the particular theology being taught. It is what the structure of regular, embodied, multi-generational community produces. As religious

participation has fallen across the developed world, families have lost one of the most reliable forms of the village they used to live inside, and many have not yet found anything that replaces it.

### *Concentric Circles, Expanded in Scale*

The concentric circles families have always lived inside — self, family, friends, community, humanity — have expanded almost without limit in scale. For most of history, the outer circles were nearly abstract. A villager on the Serengeti had no functional relationship with anyone in Osaka or Phoenix.

Today, free enterprise and global communication have expanded the circles in a way no previous era could. An entrepreneur in Tempe whose software is used by a small business owner in Nairobi is in an actual relationship of mutual service with that person — voluntary, value-creating, requiring neither coercion nor bureaucratic management. The expansion has not changed the structure. It has changed the reach. And it still rests, as it always has, on what is built or not built in the family. A person who never learned commitment in the closest circle is unlikely to build trust in wider ones. A community that has stopped forming self-reliant, other-oriented people will not sustain the institutions that broader civic life requires.

The concentric circles of human community have not changed in kind. They have expanded almost without limit in scale. They still rest, as they always have, on what is built or not built in the family.

### *Three Patterns of Community*

No family thrives in isolation, and no community works without some answer to a basic question: where does the self end, and others begin? Different societies have given different answers, and the answers shape what kind of community gets built.

In the oldest pattern, identity was collective and inherited. You belonged to your group by birth, and your obligations to it were not chosen but assumed. The hunter-gatherer band, the agricultural clan, the traditional village — these produced extraordinary cohesion inside the group, often paired with sharp boundaries against those outside it. Mutual obligation ran deep. The room for the individual to develop a distinctive contribution was narrow. This is the pattern most of human history actually lived inside.

In another pattern, the self is held by institutions. Needs that families and communities once handled — caring for the sick, schooling the young, supporting the old, easing the rough seasons of working life — are organized at scale through structures designed for the job. Schools educate. Hospitals heal. Pensions stabilize the late years. The pattern has done enormous good. It has also, where it absorbs functions that smaller institutions once carried, sometimes weakened the smaller institutions whose work it took up. The muscles of mutual aid, voluntary generosity, and neighborly attention atrophy when they are not used. The question is not whether large institutions are needed — they are — but

whether they leave intact the family-scale and community-scale institutions whose work they cannot fully replace.

A third pattern is harder to point to in a single example because it is not a finished thing. It begins from a developed individual — capable, accountable, and free — who does not dissolve into the community as in the first pattern, and does not relate to it primarily as a recipient of services as in the second. They bring themselves to it: voluntarily, with the understanding that their flourishing and the flourishing of those around them are not in competition. The Stoics had a word for this — *oikeiōsis* (oy-kay-OH-sis) — the natural extension of genuine concern outward, from self to family to community to the whole human community. The outer circles do not matter less. They depend on what happens in the inner ones.

## A Final Reflection

Not everyone reading this essay has had the family they hoped for. Some of the most extraordinary human flourishing the founders of this movement have ever witnessed has come from people who built chosen families out of nothing, who turned friends into siblings, who made belonging where none was given to them. The principles this essay has explored — commitment, repair, sustained attention, joy, and the love that holds them all together — are not the property of any particular family form. They are the building blocks of human connection itself.

What this essay argues for is not a rigid template. It is a set of conditions: stable, committed relationships at the center; genuine community radiating outward; a culture that honors the difficult and magnificent work of raising the next generation; and the rebuilding of the civic bonds that allow families of every kind to actually flourish together. The village that does this is not administered from above. It is built from below — family by family, friendship by friendship, commitment by commitment.

The first circle is where it begins. The work that happens there ripples outward, through the wider circles of community and civic life and global humanity, all the way to the rest of human civilization. It always has. It still does. And the love that builds it, repairs it, and keeps it standing is the same love the rest of the work depends on.

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*Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at [humanflourishing.us](https://humanflourishing.us), and sign it if what it names is what you are trying to practice.*

*Share this essay with someone who sees the world differently than you do — and then, when they have read it, have the conversation about it.*

*The work is ongoing. The community is forming. The conversation is just beginning.*

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### *Scott McIntosh*

#### **Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | MAC6 | Conscious Capitalism Arizona**

Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC<sup>6</sup>, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

### *Angela McIllece*

#### **Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies**

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution — helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures — including living in New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia — raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and across the United States. These experiences have shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular — expressed differently across cultures, but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

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## Selected Sources and Further Reading

This essay draws from a wider conversation about families, communities, and the conditions that allow human beings to thrive. The works below represent some of the thinking and evidence that shaped the essay. They are offered not as comprehensive citation but as starting points for readers who want to go deeper.

### *On the deep history of human family life*

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Harvard University Press, 2009). The foundational work on cooperative breeding in human evolution.

### *On marriage and the family across cultures and time*

Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (Viking, 2005). The most widely respected single-volume history of marriage as an institution across cultures.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). On fellow-feeling, sympathy, and the moral foundations of human exchange.

### *On contemporary family structure and outcomes*

Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2015). On the class divergence in stable family formation and its consequences for the next generation.

### *On Korea's "sam-po generation"*

Yue Qian, "Why Young People in South Korea are Staying Single Despite Efforts to Spark Dating," *The Conversation*, February 13, 2019.

### *On Stoic philosophy and the expanding circles*

A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, 2nd ed.* (University of California Press, 1986). Standard reference on the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis* and the concentric circles of concern.

### *On religious community and social capital*

Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

### *Data sources*

OECD Family Database ([oecd.org/els/family/database.htm](http://oecd.org/els/family/database.htm)) — for international comparisons of marriage, fertility, and household structure. Statistics Korea (KOSTAT) — for South Korean fertility and marriage data. U.S. Census Bureau and Pew Research Center — for U.S. marriage and family data.

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