Sources of solace: The power of family ties

by Amitai Etzioni in the January 13, 2009 issue

When my son Michael died suddenly at age 38, he left a pregnant wife and an infant. At the funeral I told those who crowded the cemetery that I had been there—when I lost my wife suddenly after a car accident. I said that I knew that as time passes people move on and fade away. I pleaded with family and friends to stay with Michael's widow and children for years to come.

Two years later, the family is still there. So are some friends, some of the time.

My personal experience supports something I have long suspected in my work as a sociologist: under most circumstances friendship bonds cannot replace family bonds. This is important, given the decline of the family worldwide.

Some argue that this decline matters little because groups of friends can fill this gap, serving as what sociologists call a functional equivalent. And it is true that some families provide little support to their members, and some friendship groups are very strong—typically those created when no family bonds are available. Gays and lesbians who are rejected by their families often form powerful bonds, even caring for each other during the last days of life. Nuns sometimes develop friendships so close that they have to be reminded that they are married to Christ and not to each other.

But these are situations in which the nonfamily relationships approach what Erving Goffman calls "total institutions," fully encompassing one's life. Do they reflect a broader change in society? I think not. In most cases, friendships have been and continue to be much more ephemeral and less reliable than the bonds of family, both immediate and extended.

After Mike died, his younger brother finished his training as a surgeon. He limited his job search to the city in which Mike's family lives—Los Angeles, which already has an abundance of surgeons. He did eventually land a job there, and ever since, he and

his wife, Shiri, have spent time with Mike's widow, Lainie, and their two kids at least twice a week. They get together on all holidays, often with Shiri's parents, who opened their home to my family as if it had no door.

Mike's youngest brother had a newspaper job in Irvine, California, more than an hour from Los Angeles. He moved to LA to be closer to Mike's family. He is the uncle the kids see most often, the one who teaches them the Wolverine fight songs (Mike was a University of Michigan graduate and a die-hard fan), reads them books and simply is there—to hang a photo, childproof a room or fix a remote.

The whole family gets together about twice a year, which involves transporting a small army of young kids thousands of miles, kids who have to adjust to time changes and strange beds. It also takes a fair amount of dough. But the family is all there.

The extended family has also been drafted—or, more accurately, it enlisted. Mike's parents and Lainie's do what they can; other relatives are on call.

The heroine of the past two years is Lainie. Only fellow parents fully understand how much work is involved in bringing up children, especially when they're infants. Handling them on your own means doing double duty, and there is no one to share the nights, the worries, the decisions. Lainie has done all this and then some, with rare complaints and great dedication, seven days and nights a week, week in and out. When the kids are up, she controls her grief without denying it. In a sad, bereft world, they are doing about as well as one can hope for.

As for the friends, they did not simply vanish after the funeral. A college roommate organized a lineup in which for the six weeks following Mike's death one friend or another spent the night with Lainie. The same friend moved into the hospital to be with Lainie when her daughter was born a few months after Mike passed away. Another college friend and Mike's best man put together a book of photos and letters commemorating him.

Other friends stopped by and brought food, and they had Lainie and the kids over in the first months and have sometimes since. By and large, though, their lives have moved them on. Other duties called, and grief is grating.

I offer no easy or even difficult way to reverse the decline of the family. However, a good place to start is to be clear about what is at stake. People are surely free to try

to get along without families. But they should realize that they may find themselves grieving alone, lonely in a hospital bed or a high-rise building, bereft of support except for occasional visits by friends bearing flowers and deep dishes—mainly during the first stretch of their illness or bereavement or simple loneliness due to old age.

Between family and friends, family is the stronger source of solace. At least for my wounded family.