

WILLIAM RASPBERRY



Family Values Survived Even Slavery

OKOLONA, MISS. — After all these re-enactments, the pageant still gets to me: Young Simon, perhaps 12 years old, on a forced march from Virginia to Kentucky, watching in helpless horror as his mother, several months pregnant, stumbles again and falls.

The boy turns to help her, but is ordered back in line — ordered to leave the dearest person in the world to him to die like a dog on the trail.

It's the last time Simon — my great-grandfather — ever sees his mother. He never even knew her name. And so it is that at each of our family reunions, the younger members of the clan reenact that forced march, that agonizing separation, and make their report to Nameless Grandmother.

They depict Simon's being sold "down the river" to Mississippi by his Kentucky owner, show him on the slave auction block in Columbus. (Next to the day he last saw his mother, he later told my grandfather, it was the low-point in his life: being displayed and poked and probed and sold like a thing.)

There are other, less gloomy elements of the report to Nameless Grandmother: Jubilee — the emancipation Simon's mother hardly dared dream of; Simon's persistently upright and ethical behavior; his struggles to meet the demands of his new status as a free citizen. (Family lore has it that he harvested nuts and berries to supplement his meager farm earnings in order to purchase the 40-acre parcel that was to become the nucleus of the family farm near Smithville.)

But the heart of the children's report is family — Simon's marriage to Great-Grandma Martha Ann, their children and their grandchildren — my mother and her seven siblings; in all, seven generations of descendants of Nameless Grandmother.

Interestingly enough, there's no mention of secular accomplishment in the entire skit. The recitals are of special people and

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their special traits (Aunt Dora's intellect, Aunt Fannie's wit, Uncle Ernest's musicality), not of degrees or status or income.

The whole affair is about (as we say these days) "family values." It is about family writ large — the main river stretching back to Nameless Grandmother and embracing generations yet unborn — but also about the smaller tributaries: the marriages and births that constantly renew the stream, the parental sacrifices, the inherited standards of permissible behavior.

The celebration seems remarkable at a time when families are under such stress, when two-parent households seem almost aberrant. Particularly among black Americans, with nearly

two-thirds of all births out of wedlock, the loss of family is making it more difficult to raise healthy and hopeful children or to pass along tribal values.

But how remarkable, really, is my family's devotion to family? I've been thumbing through a book called "From Plantation to Ghetto" (August Meier and Elliott Rudwick), and I'm struck by these passages:

"Much in the slave regime promoted marital and familial instability. Slave marriages were not recognized by law; slave sales were a frequent disrupter of family life; the miscegenation that resulted from the white males' sexual exploitation of female slaves, while at times involving stable and affectionate concubinage, also discouraged slave married life . . .

"Slaves nonetheless managed to create and sustain a stable family life, with two-parent male-headed households evidently the norm."

And this:

"The eagerness with which slaves hastened to legalize their marriages after the Civil War, and sought to reunite with long-separated families, reveals the importance of this institution to them."

The thing we celebrate in the story of the Nameless Grandmother may be unusual in its detail but is — or was — quite ordinary in its content. Strong

and enduring marriages, devotion to families that cared enough about children to make serious demands on them, were the norm. What is truly remarkable is how unremarkable "family values" used to be.

Economic pressures, we say today, are tearing families apart; joblessness, exacerbated by pride-destroying racism, keeps them from forming in the first place.

I think of Great-Grandpa Simon and the thousands of people like him for whom our "economic pressures" would have constituted undreamt-of opportunity, and for whom the racism we experience would have seemed an eyelash from freedom, and I wonder: What precious thing have we lost? How can we at least begin to get it back?

PUNCHLINES

WGBB's "Full Frontal Radio" team on President Bush's visit to the super-collider site: "Vice President Quayle complained, 'How come I never get to go on the good rides?'"

Arsenio Hall, "The Arsenio Hall Show": "Bush is accused of knocking boots with a woman in a Swiss chalet. I guess he really is an expert in foreign affairs."

Jay Leno, "The Tonight Show": "Bush compared himself to Columbus. When you think of it, he has a point. Both Bush and Columbus spent a lot of time traveling around the world before they discovered America."

Paula Poundstone on "The Tonight Show": "I'm excited about going to the Republican Convention because it's timed with the High-Hair Festival in Houston."

Comedy writer John Grabowski: "The Department of Transportation reported that consumer complaints on U.S. airlines were down 20 percent last year. Of course, the number of airlines is down 40 percent."

Hall: "I think I saw an unemployed postal worker. He had a sign that said, 'Will work real slow for food.'"

— Compiled by Terry Kelleher

MURRAY KEMPTON



In Franzese, Mafia Folklore Is Reborn

THE NATIONAL PURSE would be less depleted than it has gotten to be if we could have trusted congressmen to be half so wary of savings and loan bankers as alarmed about organized criminals.

But habit is habit. And so, on Wednesday, a Senate committee sat shuddering over Michael Franzese's tales of the Mafia's dominion over boxing. One has to be moderately informed and thus by definition unelectable to know that Satan is far too canny a man of business to think that corrupting the already thoroughly corrupted is a profitable investment of his resources.

So long as Don King rules the ring and owns the flesh in both corners, boxing is safe from penetration by the Honored Society. He is shrewder than any wise guy and badder than most.

Strain credulity though the general tenor of Franzese's revelations may, he did stray from orchestrations over-suggestive of the fanciful to a single chord ringing with the authentic and that lapse provided an anecdote tellingly illustrative of King's authority over his dominion.

In 1976, he said, he had been party to a sitdown between King and Paul Castellano, in time to come the Gambino crime family's Boss of All Bosses, and two of his captains.

"[They] berated him," Franzese said, for not

telling them when he knew "the outcome of fights in advance because he owned both fighters."

King fended off these complaints by assuring Castellano "that the families would not lose money on any deals they had going together." We might think a Boss of Bosses would feel entitled to livelier expectations than a vague promise that he won't lose money. But he could only swallow this cold comfort. The balance of power was too plain: Don King owned the store and Castellano was just a dissatisfied customer ineligible to sue.

Franzese's witness sounds otherwise like the workings of the imagination and thus identifies him as the master fabulist that students of the mob lost awhile ago and have ached for ever since. As fact, the Mafia is pretty grungy; but as myth it has abundantly enhanced the revenues of novelists and advanced the careers of public prosecutors. Popular art and politics have battened off it; and now, just when it seemed to wither, Michael Franzese emerges as the folklorist who can refertilize it.

He was the forbidding Sonny Franzese's first-born and thus an anointed princeling in the families. The knockabout chores of his hereditary trade were not for him; he chose instead the ways of peace without honor. He became a swindler and remains an artist in the craft. In the '80s, the

Brooklyn Federal Organized Crime Force caught him in a gas-tax skimming fraud on Long Island. Having lost his immunity, he redeemed it by offering to be a witness for the U.S. prosecutors. The bargain earned him a short prison term and a \$14-million dollar fine.

He was out in 3½ years and off to the West Coast when the prosecutors awoke to the reality that he had chattered for two years, never told them anything useful and then compounded the cheat by stiffing them on the fine. He was found in luxurious circumstances in Los Angeles where he professed himself unpropertied. He went back to prison and was there inspired to new promises to tell all.

He has, of course, told nothing of substance. Michael Franzese's genius is for the gossip that at once titillates but cannot be verified. Already he has given us Don King and that jolliest of all apostles, the Rev. Al Sharpton.

Our dreams can start to teem with visions of legendary Hollywood agents, CEOs, and ornaments of Eurotrash in unindictable converse with mob dons. It is especially pleasant to know that, being a swindler without truly malicious bent, he will tell nothing that'll land anyone in jail.