



FAMILY Matters

Television in Post-September 11th America: Television has shown us that, due to once unforeseen circumstances, Americans have a renewed – or potentially even newfound – respect for the familial unit. By Faisal Al-Juburi



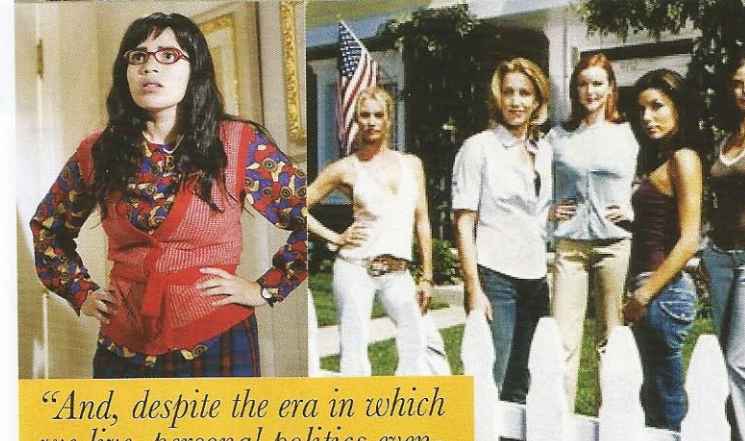
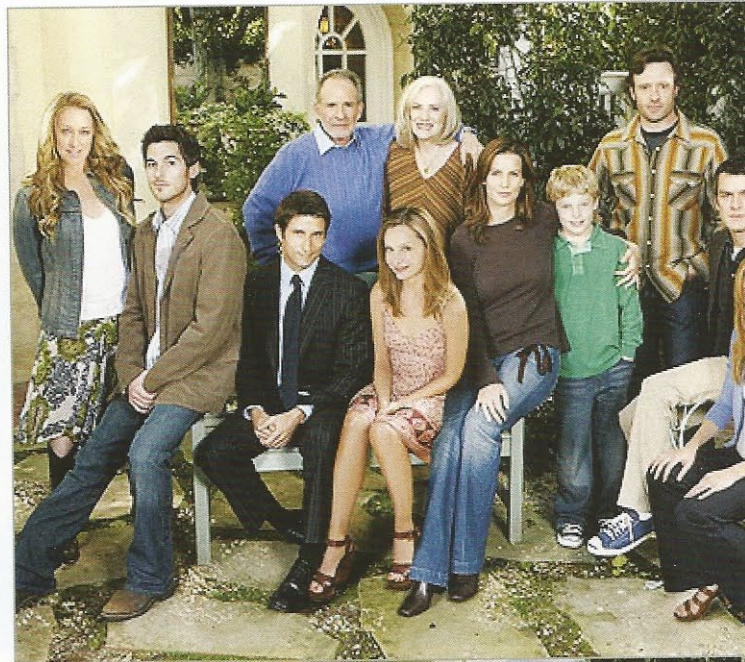
On the season finale of the new hit family television drama *Brothers and Sisters*, a mother and daughter – portrayed by American stars Sally Field and Calista Flockhart – watch their son and brother, respectively, go off to fight in the Iraq war. They give him a hug and cry as he ascends the escalator toward his flight, rightfully fearing that this may indeed be the last time that they will ever see him. To the millions who watch the series, the war instantly becomes more palpable, more affecting, for, in a single momentary scene on television, the entire struggle has been humanized. And, because of quietly affecting scenes such as this, the series has struck a chord with audiences throughout the past year, and clearly depicts the effect that the previous six years have had on the basic building block of society: the family. The fact that the family-themed series has made a comeback on national primetime television helps to illustrate the relative good that has come from the events of September 11, 2001, and the domino-like aftermath of grief, confusion, hurt, hate, and courage, helps to illustrate the renewed emphasis on



the importance of familial ties and relations. In short, people who were once focused on the individualism that is essentially synonymous with being an American have been made aware of the notion that, at the end of the day, family matters. It has been argued time and again that television is the source of many – if not all – of today’s social ills, that its depictions of life are what, in fact, spoil the minds and actions of the masses. Television has, therefore, been given a bad image and is increasingly used as a convenient target for blame, as perhaps an easy way of avoiding deep-rooted societal issues. That being said, if one looks at the trend of network offerings, it becomes evident that television itself does not necessarily mold our behavior. Rather, the television series in its current form can be likened to a form of art; it reflects our shifting priorities, ones that have, in turn, been in reality molded by a series of world events, events such as those of the now infamous date, September 11, 2001. Prior to that day – the day now dubbed as the one that forever changed the world – the popular fare on television included *Friends*, the series that made celebrities out of Courtney Cox Arquette and Jennifer Aniston, and *Sex and the City*, headlined by film star Sarah Jessica Parker. These two series, in particular, focused on the single life in a city far-removed from the hometowns of the central characters, focused on those who chose to embark on lives free from the attachments and entrapments of extended family. They fed on what was, during the better part of the 1980s and 1990s, the widespread notion that one could essentially forgo biological relations and form a selective family of friends once they had entered into adulthood. However, it is worth noting that both programs ended in 2003, with the majority of the established characters in long-term, monogamous relationships, preparing to begin families of their own. Today, the above programs have been replaced with a different type of fare, one that may not necessarily be tamer but that, at its core, places emphasis on community rather than individualism. *Ugly Betty*, an American comedy produced by film superstar Salma Hayek in the vein of a Hispanic soap opera, has as its title character, a young lady who is determined to find her place in the New York City magazine industry and simultaneously hold steadfast to her roots and family. Even *Desperate Housewives*, a primetime soap opera notorious worldwide for its over the top antics and debauchery, constantly reaffirms the importance of family by representing the interdependence of mothers and fathers, daughters and sons.

And, that is exactly where the aforementioned *Brothers and Sisters* comes into the picture, as a mirror image of where at least a portion of American society currently stands. While it may be difficult or even impossible to conduct a formal study on the subject, the innate desire within many to move closer to their parents and childhood homes during the past six years has been referenced on numerous occasions and is now dramatically represented on national television. It is a trend being seen, as the metaphorical heart grows fonder of home during turbulent times both at home and abroad. Calista Flockhart’s character in the series, a devout Republican in a staunchly liberal family, moves back home to reconnect with her family. And, despite the era in which we live, personal politics eventually fade away, paving the way for the support structure of, yes, family.

These popular television series illustrate the American society returning to a time of community, although, this time around, that sense of community is perhaps not as idealized as it was once



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made out to be. Faults are readily exposed. Families are not imperfect. At the current mo-

ment, Americans are depicted as being at an interesting crossroads – one that harks back to an old world culture, though that culture is now thoroughly stripped of the wide-eyed naïveté that had come to characterize earlier representations.

We are many times told to find good out of bad, to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. That advice may not be as applicable to travesties such as war and terrorism – two words that we hear often in the 21st century – as it is to common, more trivial situations. But, during a time in which we are grasping onto hope in any place that we can possibly find it, the glass as half full is definitely a point of view worth taking, a mantra worth espousing. Americans have apparently now reinstated their sense of family. That is essentially the silver lining of the state of affairs with which we are all faced, and to look toward it – even if it is found merely through the comfort of something as simple as a primetime comedy or drama – does not trivialize this particularly grave situation. It is, in the end, the best way to find strength, peace, and, ultimately, resolve. ■