

Individualism and Connectedness in American Society

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I want to tell you a little story. In the summer of 1971, when I was 16 years old, living in Jackson, Mississippi, I left the South for the first time to go to the great city of Philadelphia, where I worked as a tutor in a federally funded, church-run summer school for children living in some very tough, low-income neighborhoods in North Philadelphia. The program was called SAIL — Summer Adventures in Learning. It was run by the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and specifically by a Catholic youth organization called the Community Service Corps. I was one of 12 Mississippi teenagers to participate in the program, and the only Southern participant who was not a Catholic. During the same weeks that we Mississippians were in Philadelphia, teenage volunteers from the Philadelphia Archdiocese were in Mississippi, working on voter registration drives and conducting youth leadership training workshops.

That experience changed my life. It's probably the single most important thing that ever happened to me. It turned me into a kid on fire. When I got back to Jackson, I started a citywide organization called the Mississippi Community Service Corps — an effort which consumed me almost totally. When my family moved to Salem, Virginia in 1972, the first thing I did, after unpacking, was to get a phone book and start calling local pastors and church youth leaders, telling them about a new organization to help disadvantaged children that was going to be called the Virginia Community Service Corps.

What I remember most about that whole experience is the rush, the exhilaration, the deep and surprising sense of satisfaction and gratitude that I felt as a result of being devoted to something larger than myself that I hoped was helping to make the world a better place. It was like breathing free for the first time, this integrated feeling of connectedness and mission, this feeling that my life had a purpose and that my own individual needs were now seamlessly connected to a larger purpose and a larger social good. The boundaries between selfishness and selflessness seemed almost to disappear — what I loved doing most, what I selfishly craved, was also what I felt was a sincere act of giving.

It was an amazing high. Psychologically I think it may have been similar, at least in some respects, to what many Christians call a born again experience. And what you are hearing now is not just a middle-aged man being nostalgic. I remember thinking often *at the time*, at age 16 or 17 or 18, *life couldn't possibly be any better or more intense than it is now*. There was a Carly Simon song at the time called "These are the Good Old Days," and I remember telling myself *at*

the time, yes, for me these are surely the best days. In some ways the rest of my life has been an attempt to sustain and keep faith with the intense sense of purpose and connectedness that came to me, like a great gift, during that special time in my life.

Cut to nearly 30 years later, in the fall of the year 2000. An old friend and comrade from those long-ago days in Philadelphia reappears in my life. She is calling from Hanover, New Hampshire. She had read something I'd written. She wants to talk. We meet in a café in Manhattan. When I last knew and worked with her, she was the 16-year-old president of the Philadelphia Community Service Corps. Everyone knew she was leader. I wondered, what had she done with her life since those days?

Dr. Kathleen Kovner Kline is married and has four young children. She is a child psychiatrist. She does clinical work with children and their families, and she also teaches at Dartmouth Medical School. Along the way she had picked up a degree in divinity, and her husband is an Episcopalian priest. She wants to talk with me, she says, because as a doctor, her waiting list is too long.

Her waiting list is too long. Too many children — at least one in four, according to the National Research Council in 2002 [1] — are at serious risk of not achieving a productive adulthood. Doctors like Kathy are seeing high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and others serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems among U.S. young people. In this fabulously rich nation, this sweet land of liberty, the mental and behavioral health of U.S. children and adolescents seems actually to be deteriorating. In her practice, working with individual children, she can dispense medications and try to help them on an individual basis. But the numbers are growing. The waiting list is too long. As a doctor, she can try to pull some of the drowning children out of the river, but now she feels that she must ask, we all must ask, the question: Why are so many of children in the river in the first place?

She came to talk to me, she said, because she wants to move, in her own work, from treatment to treatment plus prevention. She wants to move away from a narrowly disease-based model. She wants to think much more socially and ecologically. She is less interested now in interventions that are narrowly clinical, highly targeted, and oriented to specific pathology, and much more interested in confronting those aspects of the youth mental health crisis that are structural, systemic, and social. From now on, in short, she wants to do more than treat her own patients. She also wants to help shift probabilities for *all children* — to focus much more directly on what she calls “the health of the herd.”

That conversation in a New York café led, in 2003, to a report called *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*. The report was co-authored by 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals. More specifically, for what we believe is the first time, the study brought together prominent neuroscientists who study the child's developing brain with social scientists who study civil society. Kathy was the principal scientific investigator. I was one of the project's cheerleaders and fundraisers, and also, with Kathy, a wordsmith for the report.

The report's main argument is that too many U.S. children are suffering from a lack of connectedness. The authors mean two kinds of connectedness — close, enduring connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning. The report argues that the human person is biologically primed — or “hardwired” — for these two types of connectedness, and that the weakening of both of these forms of relatedness in our society in recent decades is a primary cause of today's high and rising rates of mental problems and emotional distress among U.S. children and adolescents. Working with Kathy on this project was a terrific experience for me, and I think for both of us. It both reminded us of the commitments that first brought us together 30 years ago and also helped us to re-appropriate and deepen those commitments, while bringing to them this time, one hopes, the fuller capacities of adulthood.

Do the outlines of this little story sound familiar to you? I suspect that they probably do. A doctor who wants to help those suffering from mental and emotional distress and who is especially interested in reaching out to those among us who are least advantaged. A doctor with a commitment to social medicine and the goals of prevention and of ecological thinking about issues of mental health. A doctor who wants to step outside the clinic and seek to be a leader of a social change movement that will broaden and deepen our ways of thinking about childhood mental health.

Do any of the underlying ideas sound familiar to you? I suspect that they do. An effort at collaborative research and public education rooted in the idea that the human being is inextricably social. We are not isolated, unencumbered individuals. We need other people; we humans can only live in groups. We only smile because others smile at us. Each of us is talked into talking and loved into loving. In addition, an effort in public argument that insists that we humans are by definition meaning-makers. We make choices about what we value and love. We idealize. We are spiritually and philosophically thirsty, and we have a deep need for moral purposes larger than the self. Just as we need food and water, we need in our lives to search for something that is true and strive for something that is good.

Of course, none of these themes or ideas belong to me or Kathy or our current colleagues. We originated none of them. We borrowed all of them. Far from standing on our own or by ourselves, we stand on the shoulders of others who came before us, including a few giants who came before us. One of those giants is Alfred Adler. And for this reason I am particularly honored by your invitation to present this year's Heinz L. and Rowena R. Ansbacher lecture, and am deeply grateful to you for your judgment that my work and the work of my colleagues at the Institute for American Values may be a contribution to society that is relevant to Adlerian theory in the context of the larger field of psychology. It is a real privilege for me to be with you this evening.

Now, here is a question for us. What is the relationship between American values and Adlerian theory? In reflecting on this question, particularly in light of the work that we've done at the Institute for American Values over the past 15 years, I am particularly drawn to the theme of individualism. It is a great, rich American theme. It is closely connected to America's founding idea, which is freedom.

According to Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart*: “Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value. In some ways, it defines the good in both personal and political life.” [2] The political scientist Gottfried Dietze concurs: “The drive for freedom has been so strong that it seems to be the destiny of American democracy.” [3] Even the ideal of equality, that other master value of American culture, is frequently construed as what many observers have termed “equality of liberty.” [4]

Moreover, freedom in North America typically has a limited meaning, which in turn is rooted in a specific conception of the person. That conception often travels under the name, “individualism.” For example, surveying the origins and content of core American values, Everett C. Ladd describes “a uniquely insistent and far-reaching individualism — a view of the individual person which gives unprecedented weight to his or her choices, interests, and claims.” Ladd concludes: “The American idea of freedom is of the ‘leave me alone’ variety.” [5]

Bellah and his colleagues agree that freedom for most Americans “turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people’s values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life.” [6] This idea of freedom, in turn, is closely linked to what the *Habits of the Heart* authors aptly call “ontological individualism,” in which “the individual is the only firm reality.” [7]

Similarly, for Dietze, the United States is the world’s leading exemplar of what he calls “pure liberalism,” a cultural ethos through which, over time, “limited freedom” is increasingly displaced by “unlimited freedom.” This is a pure liberalism, then, “of which democracy and equality are mere aspects and which, for better or worse, has tended toward an ever greater purity and its concomitant value-freeness.” [8]

This “pure” conception of freedom is ubiquitous in U.S. popular culture. Perhaps its most crystalline expression is in contemporary advertising, arguably our most widely shared cultural grammar. Turn on the television today and you will see any number of advertisements philosophically identical to the car ad from El Dorado, with the slogan of “Live Without Limits,” set to the song, “Unchain My Heart.” Or to the car ad from Toyota, with the slogan of “Make Your Own Rules.” Or to the join-the-gym ad from Crunch, with the slogan of “I do anything I want. I accept no judgments.”

This way of construing freedom in America is not new. Listen to Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”:

*From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute.* [9]

Perhaps our nation’s best poet of democracy, Whitman tells us:

*Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for invalids, conformity goes to the fourth-remov’d,
I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.
Why should I pray? why should I venerate and be ceremonious?*

Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair, counsel'd with doctors and calculated close, I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones. [10]

More than two centuries ago, Crèvecoeur famously asked, “What then is the American, this new man?” Much of the answer, coming from many of our most admired observers, has been that the American is nothing less than the new Adam, emerging from perfect Edenic freedom onto American soil, the proper home of a radically new personality. A half-century ago, the literary critic R.W.B. Lewis could describe America as “the area of total possibility,” with its new hero as the “individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.” [11]

I think that this conception of the American individual is evident in many of our most well-known literary heroes, who so often follow their code and fulfill their mission largely by standing *apart* from society, in a sort of splendid isolation. I am thinking, for example, of James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, and more recently, the heroes of cowboy and detective fiction, two distinctly American literary genres.

Much of this prevailing cultural ethos stems ultimately from what my friend and Institute colleague, the University of Maryland political philosopher William Galston, calls “regime effects”: the continuing and constantly expanding effects on society of its founding principle. Although any notion of “pure” liberalism — or “unlimited freedom” — would have been abhorrent and even unrecognizable to the American founders, the American Revolution was clearly, as Lincoln was to put it, “conceived in liberty” and aims almost continuously toward “a new birth of freedom.” As Thomas S. Engeman puts it, “liberal natural right was the chief end sought in the Revolution of 1776.” [12] This “chief end” has powerfully endowed U.S. culture with its primary logic: the continual injection, eventually into all spheres of culture and into all relationships and social institutions, of ontological individualism and of the related principle of personal omnipotentiality, “the area of total possibility.”

These themes of individuation and omnipotentiality are clearly evident in U.S. family trend and in U.S. family culture, areas in which we at the Institute for American Values have focused much of our attention. Why do we have one of the world’s highest divorce rates? Why will more than half of all U.S. children today spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers? In this regard, it has always struck me as significant that our nation’s founding document is a divorce document. It is a declaration of independence: a list of reasons why people may justifiably dissolve the bonds that have connected them to others.

It also strikes me as significant that arguably *the* great novel of the U.S. is *Huckleberry Finn*. Effectively fatherless, with the runaway slave Jim his only motherly influence, Huck embodies so much of the larger American narrative: running away from the abusive Pap as well as from women who want to “civilize” him, lighting out for the territory, Huck is ready to encounter life as an unencumbered, good-hearted, untamed, grown up adolescent. Another Huck Finn story from the 1950s, Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, a celebration of hipsters who light out for new places in search of American freedom, is again a story of fathers not found and of discovering

identity through separation. The novel's first sentence is: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up."

Now, what do we make of this free-standing, self-creating, rights-bearing, happiness-pursuing American individual? Well, I for one like her quite a bit. She is so over the top and so continually surprising. She has achieved so many great things and is a source of so much of our society's energy and dynamism. Even when he is a rogue or is weak, for most of us he is impossible not to love, precisely because he tells us so much of how we came to be and who we are. In the 1950s, when conformism and groupism struck many observers as growing problems in U.S. society, my former teacher and mentor David Riesman wrote a book, *Individualism Reconsidered*, eloquently defending what he viewed as important and vital in American individualism. [13]

But this distinctively American strength can also be a great American weakness. As is so often the case, Tocqueville, in my view, gets it just right. Writing in the 1830s, Tocqueville celebrates the dynamism and democracy of American life, but he also recognizes that what he terms "individualism" in America "disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures." In its extreme form, individualism degenerates into what Tocqueville calls "downright egotism." [14]

For Tocqueville, this American brand of individualism, if unchecked, is finally a threat to democracy itself, since it can lead people to imagine wrongly that they "owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands." Not only does this slanted way of seeing life "make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendents, and separates his contemporaries, from him; it throw him back forever upon himself alone, and it threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart." [15]

This is a problem. Democracy is ultimately incompatible with this way of believing and acting. What is the antidote to this tendency? Tocqueville famously proposed voluntary civic and religious associations — a robust civil society — as the main social glue that would prevent Americans from drifting dangerously into isolated individualism.

In 1998, 24 public intellectuals and civic leaders associated with the Institute for American Values released a public appeal entitled, *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths*. With Tocqueville, we argued against the idea that human beings, even in America, are essentially self-owning, unencumbered, and auto-teleological — what we called a kind of modern equivalent of the old divine right of kings. With Tocqueville, we urged a renewal of the voluntary associations of civil society. Most of all, however, we urged a rediscovery and renewal of what we called our public moral philosophy. We wrote that

... effective civic engagement in a democracy presupposes, and depends on, a larger set of shared ideas about human virtue and the common good ... What ails our democracy is not simply the loss of certain organizational forms, but also the loss of certain organizing ideals —

moral ideals that authorize our civic creed, but do not derive from it. [O]ur most important challenge is to strengthen the moral habits and ways of living that make democracy possible.

As Adlerian psychologists, do these concerns strike you as relevant and possibly even familiar? I hope that they do. Perhaps some of our language, in its overtly moral and at times religious tone, would be uncongenial to you. But I suspect and hope that our underlying premises and concerns, particularly as regards the striving of the human person and the social interest, are recognizable by you and can be appreciated by you from the perspective of Adlerian theory. Perhaps we are not kin. But I do think that we are friends who share some important ideas and some goals for social change.

Over the past 15 years, the most important focus of the Institute's work has been families and family life — always from the basic perspective of what is most likely to produce good outcomes for children. We have argued that the weakening of the family in recent decades — in particular, the splitting up of the mother-father nucleus of the nuclear family — has been harmful to child well-being. We have argued that today's U.S. divorce rates are too high; that fathers are irreplaceable; and that marriage is our society's most pro-child social institution.

To some, these notions are too “conservative.” Indeed, because of our focus on family issues, and because of our name, we are frequently called “conservative” — or worse! But to us, these ideas seem reasonable, not necessarily or inevitably politically partisan, backed up by a large and growing body of scientific evidence, and consistent with and even supportive of liberal moral thought. And of course, I'm hoping and suggesting that they are also consistent with and supportive of the basic principles of Adlerian psychology.

Earlier this month, I spoke in Copenhagen, at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, on the topic of the family from a human rights perspective. Drawing on some of the great human rights documents, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, I tried to argue that each child has a birthright, insofar as possible, to know and be raised by her own two natural parents, who are there for the child and there for each other — except in those cases when this family structure is not in the best interests of the child. As a further elaboration of this right, particularly in light of current scientific advances in assisted reproductive technologies, and drawing on the work of the Canadian ethicist Margaret Somerville, I also suggested that each child has a right to a natural biological origin — that is, to be born as a result of a mother's egg united with a father's sperm — as well as a right to know his or her biological origin.

Now, you may disagree with some or even all of these ideas. The Danes were so polite and civilized that I could not ultimately figure out what they thought! But I do believe — and think that the Danes generally agreed — that ideas such as these, while not quite (yet!) mainstream, can enrich our conversation about human and family rights, just as I believe — and am hoping you will agree — that such ideas can enrich our conversation about civil society as well as be supportive of some of the important work that you do as psychologists and as citizens working for a more communally oriented society.

For in assessing the pros and cons of American individualism, surely the most obvious problem — surely the greatest weakness — is the corrosive effect of ontological individualism on

American family life and, in particular, on the well-being of children. I can't know for certain, but I would suspect that you see the results of this trend all too often in your practice, and, in light of Adlerian theory, can appreciate its distorting effects on family and community life.

Finally, in addition to content, there is also method and style. Here, too, I suspect that we have much in common.

For example, our method at the Institute for American Values, our style of working, strongly emphasizes collaborative research and interdisciplinary deliberation. We don't put much stock in individualism. Most of our work is done in groups, by teams of collaborating scholars. As I mentioned, our *Hardwired to Connect* report had 33 co-authors. Our *Call to Civil Society* had 24.

Our work is also more public than narrowly professional, more cultural than specifically political, and much more a request for dialogue than an attempt at top-down "education," or instruction by experts. We frequently view and describe our publications as "call" or "appeals." A "call" implies a response. An "appeal" implies an answer. Fundamentally, we view ourselves as citizen-scholars who are working together to start conversations with our fellow citizens about important issues of family life, civil society, and our public moral philosophy.

Relatedly, our method also emphasizes the importance of moral reasoning and moral argument. We also talk often enough about religion and God. We are not a ministry, and many of our leaders and participants are not publicly or conventionally religious. But we recognize and respect the spiritual search as part of the human condition and recognize the important role of religion, both for good and for ill, in U.S. civil society. We would no more think of excluding theologians and moral philosophers from our collaborating teams than we would think of excluding economists ... or psychologists.

Is this way of thinking familiar to you? I can't say for certain, but I suspect and hope that it might be. I heard once about a doctor who liked to have his meetings in cafes and who asked that patients not lie on a couch but sit in a chair, looking the doctor in the eye. I heard about a doctor committed to social medicine, to championing the underdog, and to the ideal of the physician as educator and agent of social change. This doctor knew and taught that the isolated "self" is not the only or even main reality in psychology ... or in society. This doctor was a man of science, essentially a secular man, but also a man whose world view had a decidedly philosophical and (I would hazard to say) even spiritual component — a man who viewed the drive for self-perfection as the essence of the human project; a man who found much of importance to discuss with pastors; and a man who wrote sympathetically about religion, viewing God as an idea about perfection and therefore arguably the highest of all thinkable ideas.

I admire this doctor. I believe that I and my colleagues stand in part on his shoulders. And for that reason, I look to you as friends, and reach out to you in respect and gratitude. Thank you.

Notes

1. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Goodman, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (eds.), *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2002).
2. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 23.
3. Gottfried Dietze, *American Democracy: Aspects of Practical Liberalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.
4. John Harmon McElroy, *Finding Freedom: America's Distinctive Cultural Formation* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 153. See also James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, vol. II (New York: Commonwealth Publishing, 1908), 692.
5. Everett C. Ladd, "The American Ideology: An Exploration and a Survey of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of American Values" (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute, March 1992), 2, 9.
6. Bellah, et al., 23. See also Ladd, "Thinking About America," *The Public Perspective* 4, no. 5 (July/August 1993), 19-26.
7. Bellah, et. al., 276.
8. Dietze, 9.
9. Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 138
10. Whitman, "Song of Myself," *ibid.*, 94, 64.
11. R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 91, 5.
12. Thomas S. Engeman, book review (*Locke in America*), *The Review of Politics* 58 (Spring 1996), 382.
13. David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954).
14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II (New York: Schocken Books, 1961; first published in English in 1935), 118.
15. *Ibid.*, 120.