

Can self-interest include a return to a we-centered culture?



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“The principle of self-interest rightly understood appears to me the best suited of all philosophical theories to the wants of the men of our time. ... Each American knows when to sacrifice some of his private interests to save the rest.”

So wrote French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, who in the 1830s spent considerable time in America seeking to understand its character. His reflections were published in his book “Democracy in America.”

Self-interest is important. If we were not interested in our own well-being, we would probably perish. Without self-interest, would we build shelters, plant crops, build companies, save for the future? Without self-interest we would die. But self-interest can become selfishness, obsession with self and hurtful to others. Tocqueville’s “principle of self-interest rightly understood” acknowledges both the importance of self-interest, as well as the limits of only considering the self. Unbridled self-interest will, in fact, lead to destruction that undermines and destroys others, community and then even the self.

The balance between the “I” and the “we” is the theme of the book, “The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again,” written by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Garrett.

The authors analyze how in both politics and the economy, America went from political divisiveness and economic disparity at the beginning of the 20th century, to experience an upswing mid-century where there was more cooperation between political parties and more income equality. They refer to moving from an “I-centered” society to a more “we-centered” culture. They then document the decline of we-centeredness and return to the current self-centered culture with renewed income disparity and political polarization. (This was explored in more detail in last week’s Insight.)

Their analysis also includes the movement from isolation to solidarity and then back to isolation as reflected in today’s society. The late 19th and early 20th century, sometimes called the Gilded Age, was a period of movement from rural towns to larger cities, and the addition of large waves of immigrants. It also was a period of rapid growth of various civic institutions, clubs, lodges and ethnic associations. National organizations with civic purpose also were founded, such as the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and Rotary clubs. Joining such an organization expressed not only an interest in supporting certain causes and values, but also became an important part of social interaction and companionship. We became a nation of joiners, with membership in such associations reaching a high in the 1950s.

The second half of the century saw a dramatic participation decline in such organizations. It is another example of the pattern they describe as the “I-We-I” curve.

Looking at religious organizations and attendance, they observed the same pattern. The authors refer to religious institutions as having been “the single most important source of community connectedness and social solidarity in America. ... Involvement in a faith community turns out to be a strong predictor of connection to the wider, secular world.” It predicts not only philanthropic giving to religious causes, but also to secular causes. Members of church communities are also three times more likely to belong to secular organizations such as Rotary, Scouts and neighborhood associations. As with other associa-

tions, church membership and religious attendance declined after the peak in the early 1960s. The authors write, “The Sixties represented a perfect storm for American institutions of all sorts — political, social and religious.”

In Putnam and Garrett’s analysis of individualism vs. community they show a similar upswing during the first half of the century followed by the downswing to the earlier levels of hyper-individualism. They point to the relationship between the individual and community as a timeless dualism that appeared during the early 1600s, in the words of the poet John Donne who famously wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself. ... Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMUNITY

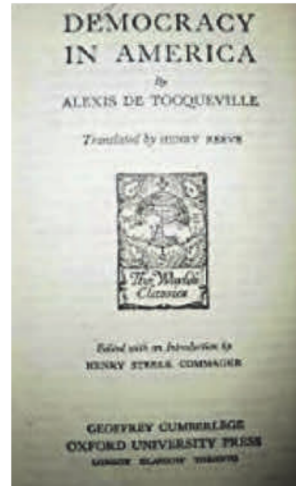
The authors note the imagery of individualism and community in America’s history. In the frontier we have both the lone cowboy, as well as the wagon train where settlers took care of each other as they headed West. Even in the midst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address urged for a united community following the war, “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” The individualism of social Darwinism with its “survival of the fittest” gave way to a religious movement of caring for the least among us expressed in Jesus’ teaching to feed the hungry, visit the sick, care for the homeless.

That community spirit reached a high again in the 1960s as expressed by Martin Luther King Jr. in his letter from the Birmingham jail that included the words, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” That same decade, President John F. Kennedy echoed the sentiment in a speech saying, “The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened. ... We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution ... whether we are going to treat our fellow American as we want to be treated.”

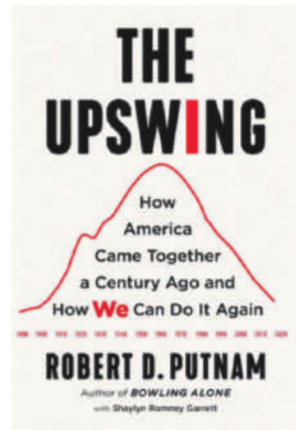
But also during the 1960s, the voices of Ayn Rand and others began a counter narrative. Rand’s novel “Atlas Shrugged” was said to be the most-read book of that century other than the Bible. Her book included such controversial but catchy statements as, “Nobody has ever given a reason why man should be his brother’s keeper,” and “Altruism is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights.” Her influence on a conservatism that had included solidarity and compassion led to what is now a “far-right” that is individualistic in character. Meanwhile, a similar move on the left led to a “far-left” message of the hippie slogan “If it feels good, do it.” It was an individualism of personal liberation. Responsibility faded while rights became the slogan on both sides. The “I-We-I” pattern again characterized this century.

Can the increased interest in diversity and inclusion be the beginning of a new moral sensitivity to see beyond a narrow self-interest so we can seek the common good? Let us affirm our various religious and cultural narratives as we work together to see our common values leading us to a new upswing toward a more we-centered culture.

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Alexis de Tocqueville recorded his reflections on the nature of 1830s American in his book “Democracy in America.” Submitted, Douglas Kindschi



“The Upswing,” by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Garrett. Submitted, Douglas Kindschi

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