

Why Community Is Important

American culture famously celebrates individual liberty and the achievements of the “self-made” man. At its best, this celebration can teach future generations to explore their potential, take personal responsibility for their lives, and strive for self-sufficiency. These are all undeniably good things that we should encourage in our society.

But, as with anything, focus on the individual can be taken to extremes. An extreme focus on the individual both fosters certain negative traits, such as selfishness, but also ignores the important role that community and broader society play in every success story. That is not to say that any given individual’s success is not primarily related to their personal hard work, determination, and vision. It is to say that all of us, successful and unsuccessful alike, rely on our communities for material and spiritual prosperity.

But, America’s sense of community has suffered greatly in recent years, both on a national and local level. Mediating institutions that used to be the backbone of our communities—churches, civic groups, fraternal organizations, charitable institutions—are withering, or straying from their core missions. Social media and popular culture further divide, atomize, and distance people from each other. All of this erodes the sense of place and belonging for millions of Americans.

Sad to say, political leaders from both sides of the aisle share the blame for these unfortunate developments, despite their best intentions. On the Right, a deference to big business, military ventures, and extreme individualism has often overshadowed the need to protect and foster our communities. On the Left, a reluctance to serve Americans first, an obsession with global issues, the insistence on viewing people as members of demographic groups rather than individuals or members of larger communities, and a disdain for faith-based values has alienated our countrymen within their own home.

As the famous sermon goes, “no man is an island.” Human beings need fellowship, friendship, and purpose to thrive. We must be a part of something that is greater than ourselves, but also immediate to us, from which we can draw strength and give strength in equal measure. Being 320 million people who happen to buy the same products, pay taxes to the same government, and live on the same continent won’t cut it. We must tie ourselves together by more lasting bonds.

Most Americans already know this as a fact of life. Thankfully, their understanding is spreading. More and more politicians, academics, and activists are recognizing the central role of community to the wellbeing of the human soul and the soul of our nation.

Restoring our communities cannot be a partisan project, but it must be central to our laws, our regulations, and our entire spirit of governance. Together, we can restore our national belonging, and ensure that our society serves everyone, no matter where they live.

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