**The Inflation of the Individual**

*Leave Me Free to Be Me*

“Who am I? What can I do?” are the perennial questions asked. Once upon a time the parents and the community answered: “You belong to us. Let us care for you and those questions will be answered in good time.” True to this response, the family and the larger community worked with the individual in a largely unstated way.

Today the question is being answered very differently. In what seems to be a lack of confidence in the community, the government is producing a stream of legislation to define and safeguard the rights of the individual. Indeed, the protection of the individual seems to be the driving force for so much of our legislation in America today. Nothing, it seems, is left to chance; everything needs to be legislated as a right.

In today’s world, freedom for the individual entails the claims of individuals for a wider array of rights than ever before–not just the right to life and freedom from serious personal harm, but the right to avoid anything that might be regarded as “shaming” or “bullying.” But the march of personal freedom goes even further than that. Increasingly the individual is being invested with the right to transform itself into whatever it wishes, never mind what society had established as the limits. Should a teenager freely be allowed to determine whether or not to have a sex change operation? Many today would argue that the individual, young as the person might be, should be given the right to define “who I am and what I will be.”

There has always been tension between the community, which pressures the individual to fit in, and the individual, with the inborn thirst for freedom. Compromises have always been necessary so that a balance might be struck between conformity to society and personal freedom. Today, as in the past, the lament of many individualists may sound something like this: *The world is closing in on me these days. Other people are suffocating me. I just wish that they would stop trying to fit me to their standards. After all, I’ve got my own life to live. I just want to be me.*

The issue is related to the rapidly expanding rights of the individual over and against the family and the entire community. Should individuals be left to choose not just what job to take or how many children to have, but what standard of dress they will adopt, even if it may be quite contrary to that of their community? Or, for that matter, what code of conduct they will live by? Clearly the contest today favors the rights of the individual over and against other social groups, family included.

But some of us old-timers look back to days when the individual could never have claimed such rights. Parents exercised a tight control over our early lives, but even as we grew older we still had to adjust our behavior to the norms of the community. Most of us would have even been puzzled by what it means to cry:“Let me be free to be me.” If only because we had to admit that we were the creation by many others–and it was folly to think otherwise.

Is this just the lament of an old-timer who yearns for the good old days when everything was just the way it should be? Or is this something more substantial than just a passing fit of nostalgia? There is plenty to suggest a real change here, but let’s now review some of the evidence.

*Back in the Old Days*

For anyone growing up in the early post-war years, it was hard to escape the tight embrace of the family. We thought of ourselves as a product of our family, and we assumed a responsibility to provide for parents and to share with siblings as we grew older (even if this didn’t always happen exactly as scripted). The image of the old-fashioned family I remember from the 1950s could have been right off a Norman Rockwell cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*: the father arriving home from work to be met by his wife in apron, with the kids tugging at their dad’s arm to get his attention. Everyone in the family had an assigned role, but there was warmth and affection aplenty to repay us if we all did our job.

Aunts and uncles paid their occasional weekend visits, prepared to help out if there was anything we needed from them. On special occasions we hopped into the car to visit our grandparents for one of those family dinners that we always relished so much. Apart from the food, there was the chance to spend time with our cousins, and bask in the affectionate praise we could always count on receiving from grandpa and grandma. We didn’t need a sociologist to lecture us on the importance of the extended family; we felt it deeply on these visits.

The tight embrace in which we lived didn’t end with the family. The neighborhood community was another force to be reckoned with. Even in our own low-income housing project we knew the names of everyone in our section of family units, and the next one down, and perhaps even the one after that. The units in the housing project might not have had front porches with rocking chairs, but we did sit on the stoops and chat with the people next door. We kids were allowed to go out to play every afternoon without real concern for our safety, since our neighborhood was an extension of home, with plenty of eyes to watch out for us. The eyes included those of the stern older women who didn’t hesitate to scold us for what they regarded as naughty behavior. They were the keepers of tradition–the old-fashioned values and behavior that we were expected to honor–just in case our parents forgot to instruct us. They would shame us without hesitation if we misbehaved. But they also made sure that no harm came to us. Now and then, of course, one of us would come home bruised, often enough from a fight with another kid, but none of this was life-threatening.

Life was good then, most of us would have agreed. On our list of blessings we might have ticked off our close interaction with others in and outside the family, the friends we had, the sense of belonging that we felt, the advice so frequently offered. But personal freedom would never have been high on our list. The embrace of the family and friends was too tight for that.

The individual was indeed bundled in the community, which afforded him protection (from loneliness as well as from outside threats), but imposed on him restraint as well. After all, he had standards to live up to if he was to remain a cherished part of his family and neighborhood. For most of us in that day, it would have been irresponsible to alienate ourselves from the community. After all, we thought of ourselves as fashioned by the community, the product of family and neighbors, and so responsible to them throughout our lives.

That was then, however. Today, the same bundling is perceived as more of a constraint than a blessing. The benefits that the family and community provide might be acknowledged, but they are often outweighed by the threat they present to individual freedom. The individual must be liberated if it is to fly where it will and to become whatever it wishes.

*What Happened?*

Somehow those tight ties with the family and neighborhood mysteriously started to unravel. Not all at once, of course, and not for a single identifiable cause. Who knew what was responsible for the changes? The post-war employment boom with the promise of good jobs in other places? Or perhaps the mobility of the population aided by affordable automobiles and the new interstate highway system? Or could the explosion of television a decade earlier have been the catalyst for some of the changes?

Whatever the case, those large family gatherings on holidays became less frequent, and so did the visits of aunts and uncles to look in on us. The daily call to family dinner was heard in fewer and fewer homes, as the old ritual gatherings of the household went out of fashion. Even when family members gathered in the living room, they often fell silent in front of the TV screen. (But let’s not exaggerate the importance of television; it might not have been as much a cause of the social changes as a convenient refuge after the fact.)

For decades we had been shedding our extended family, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reminds us, and now we were snapping some of the bonds holding the nuclear family together. During the late 1960s we began seeing many more single-parent families as the divorce rate rose sharply and the number of out-of wedlock children started its steady climb [Brooks]. All this presented a challenge to the picture of the traditional family smiling at us from the pages of the popular magazines just a few years earlier. The nuclear family was by no means dead, but it was no longer the almost universal norm it had once been. Today only one-third of all Americans live in a traditional two-parent nuclear family, David Brooks tells us. And all this is without even taking into account the devastation of the family occurring within inner-city Black communities.

At the same time, we were gradually becoming estranged from our neighbors in the community. For some reason people spent much less time on their front porches, or stoops, watching kids play stickball in the street or simply chatting with one another. There was a turn-around in the households, with many families now increasingly focused on the backyard and the barbeque grill. A few good friends may have been invited to these parties, but most families no longer knew their neighbors nearly as well as they once had. The scowl of those older women who policed the community vanished, but so did the positive oversight they used to provide as they enforced the neighborhood social standards.

On top of all this, even the voluntary associations that had been building up since early in the century began waning sometime after the Second World War. These voluntary associations, which had sprung up very early in the century, included the Scouts, the Knights of different kinds, Kiwanas and Rotary Clubs, bridge clubs, book clubs, and other such organizations. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam provides data to support the decline of these associations after the war, even if he can not explain the cause. Consequently, people who were already experiencing a drop in interaction within the family did not have as many opportunities as they once had for relating to others in the community through voluntary clubs and associations.

*New Sounds of Freedom*

The 1960s were something of a mythical moment–“the dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” as the musical *Hair* put it. It was an age of overnight change: in hair styles, clothes, and just about everything else. Long sideburns, facial hair and untamed locks were viewed as the unmistakable signs of hippies, those who had freed themselves from society’s staid conventions to become prophets of the New Age. They were free to smoke dope, drop acid, and see visions in their drug-induced dreams. “Leave me alone to taste life,” they seemed to be saying.

The social revolution of the 1960s was a big step toward individualization. Despite the communes, the hippy groups, the alliances formed to support the continuous protests, the overall movement by the end of the decade was decidedly away from solid community. Those new gatherings may have lasted for a time, but they were certainly not permanent fixtures. The period that I remember as the Age of Aquarius set out to reform society and rid it of its ills. In the end, however, it promoted the “me” even as the “we” was breaking down. It took up the cause of personal liberation and rationalized the individualism that had already been growing for years. “Let me be me and enjoy the freedom to do whatever I wish,” was the slogan of the day.

But why not? The view of the individual was changing; the person was seen as self-grown, not so much the product of the family or community that nurtured it. After all, the community was nowhere as visible or as pervasive as it once had been. With the declaration of independence celebrated in the song of the 60s, the individual came to be recognized as autonomous. This was a major step toward dispensing with the importance of the community.

In brief, the 1960s may have stepped up the process of undercutting those community features that had once been so important a part of our life, but the age did something even more significant. It offered a rationale for the hyper-individualism that would define our society in the years to come. The age articulated the belief that the individual is not so much beholden to community, but more in contention with it.

*Erasing the Other*

In time the legal apparatus to protect the individual against what we might call the encroachment of others grew sizable. Personal rights began with free speech, over-ruling the taboos that an earlier society may have imposed. The right to freedom of conscience was interpreted to mean that an atheist would no longer be obliged to hear school prayers since the latter were banned. The right to privacy was extended to cover not just personal records, but the right to have sexual relations with whomever the person wanted and to use whatever items, including abortificients were desired. Eventually, an individual could even define oneself as transgender and claim the right to special bathroom facilities in support of this identity..

Meanwhile, technological advances allowed us to control our interactions with others even as we dissolve the face of these others. The rise of the computer from the 1980s and the cell phone from the 1990s allowed users to dispense with face-to-face social contact in favor of virtual friends. Many have referred to this as a notable step in the replacement of the *real* community with a *virtual* community–not just contacted on-line rather than face-to-face, but also self chosen rather than assigned by chance.

Other measures to control the social environment followed. “Helicopter parenting” eventually became popular, increasing control of parents over their children, but shielding them from *“*bullying*”* and other imagined and real dangersoutside the home*.* This resulted in the failure of kids to innoculate themselves against the dangers of social life: being picked on, being discounted or left out, and so on. Thus, children no longer had as much chance to learn how to deal with social relationships through trial and error. While this may offer parents more authority over their children, it may have narrowed the social world of the young.

Overall, people not only did without the communities they once relied on for a full human life, but they gradually began to believe that they were better off without them. Communities had always been regarded as mixed blessings, but as time went on the negative began to receive more attention. They may have shielded individuals from harm, but they also shamed persons at times, shackled persons to community expectations, and so hampered what was seen to be “personal growth.” All this only strengthened the case for freedom from the “we” through liberation of the “me.”

What, then, are the social options for the hyper-individualist of our day? Many seem to have opted for self-chosen communities–the world of like-minded individuals who look for the kind of limited bonding that is always available on-line. This is a phenomenon that is the subject of many magazine articles today. Many in the hyper-individualized America of our day may compensate for the loss of community by creating their own “politicized community,” as we have seen in our increasingly fragmented nation.

But will this do the job? Will virtual communities be enough to provide at least the minimal support and restraint that individuals seem to require? Will they satisfy what we might assume is the basic need for positive social interaction?

Even what we would have regarded as the bottom line in social interaction appears to have changed in our day. The desire to share life with a significant other seems to be in decline, as David Brooks notes. “The share of Americans ages 25-55 who weren’t married or living with a romantic partner went up from 29 to 38 percent between 1990 and 2019,” Brooks reports. “More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well.” This suggests that the breakdown of community includes more than just the neighborhood and the family; it even deprives many of close friendship or a significant other.

*Reversing Direction*

Rights language has gained such currency these days that even right-wingers, those strongly opposed to the rampant individualism today, are themselves using rights language to counter some of the claims of their adversaries. If you claim that the internet user is being bullied or shamed on-line by inappropriate texts, another can make th counter-claim to free speech. The legal guarantee of endless individual rights is a doomed, we are beginning to realize because the claim of one group is bound to conflict with the claim of another in what becomes a collision of expanding individual right claims. Haven’t we come to understand that the hope of growing individual rights is simply promising more than it can deliver?

Can we recognize what civilization has always recognized–the importance of community as a positive social force, not just a burden on the individual? At times, of course, the society may not have acted beneficially to individuals, especially of a certain class, race or ethnic group, but it is naive to believe that society is nothing more than a holding pen for a mass of radical individualists.

What can we do to reclaim community–real face-to-face community, not the dial-up virtual kind? Even before we can do that, we have to appreciate the value of what, according to social commentators, has been slipping away for over a half century. We must understand our vision of recapturing community as something much more than a fool’s quest, the fantasy of returning to the good old days. The family and community must be recognized as critical and usually positive elements in shaping the individual.

We must also acknowledge the successful attempts to restore what was being lost during the march of hyper-individualization. The yearly family gatherings held in hotels or lodges to bring together relatives who otherwise would have had little contact with one another. The associations formed by churches and neighborhoods to build friendships and create a real sense of solidarity. There are many other prophetic efforts being made to restore what has been lost. All this testifies to a recognition by many that something valuable has been lost.

At bottom, if the role of the individual is indeed exaggerated today, as it has been for some time now, restoration of a proper balance between the Me and the We is imperative.

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