TO HELP WITH QUESTION 1:

A Nation of Weavers

The social renaissance is happening from the ground up.

By David Brooks

Opinion Columnist

Feb. 18, 2019

I start with the pain. A couple times a week I give a speech somewhere in the country about social isolation and social fragmentation. Very often a parent comes up to me afterward and says, “My daughter took her life when she was 14.” Or, “My son died of an overdose when he was 20.”

Their eyes flood with tears. I don’t know what to say. I squeeze a shoulder just to try to be present with them, but the crying does not stop. As it turns to weeping they rush out of the auditorium and I am left with my own futility. What can I say to these parents? What can I say to the parents still around who don’t yet know they may soon become those parents?

This kind of pain is an epidemic in our society. When you cover the sociology beat as I do, you see other kinds of pain. The African-American woman in Greenville who is indignant because young black kids in her neighborhood face injustice just as gross as she did in 1953. The college student in the Midwest who is convinced that she is the only one haunted by compulsive thoughts about her own worthlessness. The Trump-supporting small-business man in Louisiana who silently clenches his fists in rage as guests at a dinner party disparage his whole way of life.

These different kinds of pain share a common thread: our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, distrust, tribalism, shaming and strife.

On Dec. 7, 1941, countless Americans saw that their nation was in peril and walked into recruiting stations. We don't have anything as dramatic as Pearl Harbor, but when 47,000 Americans kill themselves every year and 72,000 more die from drug addiction, isn't that a silent Pearl Harbor? When the basic norms of decency, civility and truthfulness are under threat, isn't that a silent Pearl Harbor? Aren't we all called at moments like these to do something extra?

My something extra was starting something nine months ago at the Aspen Institute called Weave: The Social Fabric Project. The first core idea was that social isolation is the problem underlying a lot of our other problems. The second idea was that this problem is being solved by people around the country, at the local level, who are building community and weaving the social fabric. How can we learn from their example and nationalize their effect?

We traveled around the country and found them everywhere. We'd plop into big cities like Houston and small towns like Wilkesboro, N.C., and we'd find 25 to 100 community "Weavers" almost immediately. This is a movement that doesn't know it's a movement.

Some of them work at organizations: a vet who helps other mentally ill vets in New Orleans; a guy who runs a boxing gym in Appalachian Ohio where he nominally teaches young men boxing, but really teaches them life; a woman who was in the process of leaving the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago when she saw two little girls playing with broken bottles in the empty lot across the street. She turned to her husband and said: We're not moving away from that. We're not going to be just another family that abandoned this place.

Many others do their weaving in the course of everyday life — because that's what neighbors do. One lady in Florida said she doesn't have time to volunteer, but that's because she spends 40 hours a week looking out for local kids and visiting sick folks in the hospital. We go into neighborhoods and ask, "Who is trusted here?" In one neighborhood it was the guy who collects the fees at the parking garage.

We're living with the excesses of 60 years of hyperindividualism. There's a lot of emphasis in our culture on personal freedom, self-interest, self-expression, the idea that life is an individual journey toward personal fulfillment. You do you. But Weavers share an ethos that puts relationship over self. We are born into relationships, and the measure of our life is in the quality of our relationships. We precedes me.

Whether they live in red or blue America, they often use the same terms and embody the same values — deep hospitality, showing up for people and keep showing up. They are somewheres, not anywheres — firmly planted in their local community. I met one guy in Ohio who began his work by standing in the town square with a sign: "Defend Youngstown."

The phrase we heard most was "the whole person." Whether you are a teacher, a nurse or a neighbor, you have to see and touch the whole person — the trauma, the insecurities and the dreams as much as the body and the brain.

But the trait that leaps out above all others is "radical mutuality": We are all completely equal, regardless of where society ranks us. "I am broken; I need others to survive," an afterschool program leader in Houston told us. "We don't do things for people. We don't do things to people. We do things with people," said a woman who builds community for teenagers in New Orleans.

Being around these people has been one of the most uplifting experiences of my life. Obviously, it's made me want to be more neighborly, to be more active and intentional in how I extend care.

But it has also changed my moral lens. I've become so impatient with the politicians I cover! They are so self-absorbed! Social scientists tell us that selfishness is natural, people are motivated by money, power and status. But Weavers are not motivated by any of these things. They want to live in right relation with others and to serve the community good.

Their example has shown me that we don't just have a sociological problem; we have a moral problem. We all create a shared moral ecology through the daily decisions of our lives. When we stereotype, abuse, impugn motives and lie about each other, we've ripped the social fabric and encouraged more ugliness. When we love across boundaries, listen patiently, see deeply and make someone feel known, we've woven it and reinforced generosity. As Charles Péguy said, "The revolution is moral or not at all."

So the big question is: How do we take the success the Weavers are having on the local level and make it national? The Weavers are building relationships one by one, which takes time. Relationships do not scale.

But norms scale. If you can change the culture, you can change behavior on a large scale. If you can change the lens through which people see the world, as these Weavers have changed mine, then you can change the way people want to be in the world and act in the world. So that's our job. To shift the culture so that it emphasizes individualism less and relationalism more.

Culture changes when a small group of people, often on the margins of society, find a better way to live, and other people begin to copy them. These Weavers have found a better way to live. We at Weave — and all of us — need to illuminate their example, synthesize their values so we understand what it means to be a relationalist and not an individualist. We need to create hubs where these decentralized networks can come together for solidarity and support. We need to create a shared Weaver identity. In 1960, few people called themselves feminists. By 1980, millions did. Just creating that social identity and that sense of mutual purpose is an act of great power.

I guess my ask is that you declare your own personal declaration of interdependence and decide to become a Weaver instead of a ripper. This is partly about communication. Every time you assault and stereotype a person, you've ripped the social fabric. Every time you see that person deeply and make him or her feel known, you've woven it.

We also need to have faith in each other. Right now, millions of people all over are responding to the crisis we all feel. We in the news media focus on Donald Trump and don't cover them, but they are the most important social force in America right now. Renewal is building, relationship by relationship, community by community. It will spread and spread as the sparks fly upward.

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A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 18, 2019, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: A Nation Of Weavers.

TO HELP WITH QUESTION 2:

Sotomayor Issues Challenge to a Century-old Ruling

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 17, 2009

By JESS BRAVIN

WASHINGTON -- In her maiden Supreme Court appearance last week, Justice Sonia Sotomayor made a provocative comment that probed the foundations of corporate law.
During arguments in a campaign-finance case, the court's majority conservatives seemed persuaded that corporations have broad First Amendment rights and that recent precedents upholding limits on corporate political spending should be overruled.

But Justice Sotomayor suggested the majority might have it all wrong -- and that instead the court should reconsider the 19th century rulings that first afforded corporations the same rights flesh-and-blood people have.

Judges "created corporations as persons, gave birth to corporations as persons," she said. "There could be an argument made that that was the court's error to start with...[imbuing] a creature of state law with human characteristics."

After a confirmation process that revealed little of her legal philosophy, the remark offered an early hint of the direction Justice Sotomayor might want to take the court.

"Progressives who think that corporations already have an unduly large influence on policy in the United States have to feel reassured that this was one of [her] first questions," said Douglas Kendall, president of the liberal Constitutional Accountability Center.

"I don't want to draw too much from one comment," says Todd Gaziano, director of the Center for Legal and Judicial Studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation. But it "doesn't give me a

lot of confidence that she respects the corporate form and the type of rights that it should be afforded."

For centuries, corporations have been considered beings apart from their human owners, yet sharing with them some attributes, such as the right to make contracts and own property. Originally, corporations were a relatively rare form of organization. The government granted charters to corporations, delineating their specific functions. Their powers were presumed limited to those their charter spelled out.

"A corporation is an artificial being, invisible, intangible," Chief Justice John Marshall wrote in an 1819 case. "It possesses only those properties which the charter of its creation confers upon it."

But as the Industrial Revolution took hold, corporations proliferated and views of their functions began to evolve.
In an 1886 tax dispute between the Southern Pacific Railroad and the state of California, the court reporter quoted Chief Justice Morrison Waite telling attorneys to skip arguments over whether the 14th Amendment's equal-protection clause applied to corporations, because "we are all of opinion that it does."

That seemingly off-hand comment reflected an "impulse to shield business activity from certain government regulation," says David Millon, a law professor at Washington and Lee University. "A positive way to put it is that the economy is booming, American production is leading the world and the courts want to promote that," Mr. Millon says. Less charitably, "it's all about protecting corporate wealth" from taxes, regulations or other legislative initiatives.

Subsequent opinions expanded corporate rights. In 1928, the court struck down a Pennsylvania tax on transportation corporations because individual taxicab drivers were exempt. Corporations get "the same protection of equal laws that natural persons" have, Justice Pierce Butler wrote.

From the mid-20th century, though, the court has vacillated on how far corporate rights extend. In a 1973 case before a more liberal court, Justice William O. Douglas rejected the Butler opinion as "a relic" that overstepped "the narrow confines of judicial review" by second-guessing the legislature's decision to tax corporations differently than individuals.
Today, it's "just complete confusion" over which rights corporations can claim, says Prof. William Simon of Columbia Law School.

Even conservatives sometimes have been skeptical of corporate rights. Then-Associate Justice William Rehnquist dissented in 1979 from a decision voiding Massachusetts's restriction of corporate political spending on referendums. Since corporations receive special legal and tax benefits, "it might reasonably be concluded that those properties, so beneficial in the economic sphere, pose special dangers in the political sphere," he wrote.

On today's court, the direction Justice Sotomayor suggested is unlikely to prevail. During arguments, the court's conservative justices seem to view corporate political spending as beneficial to the democratic process. "Corporations have lots of knowledge about environment, transportation issues, and you are silencing them during the election," Justice Anthony Kennedy said during arguments last week.

But Justice Sotomayor may have found a like mind in Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. "A corporation, after all, is not endowed by its creator with inalienable rights," Justice Ginsburg said, evoking the Declaration of Independence.

How far Justice Sotomayor pursues the theme could become clearer when the campaign-finance decision is delivered, probably by year's end.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A19

TO HELP WITH QUESTION 3:

Two Early Presidents Who Questioned the Wisdom of 'the People'

By Virginia DeJohn Anderson
April 22, 2019

Review of THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY
The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality
By Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein

Many Americans might be surprised to learn that neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution includes the word "democracy." The gentlemen-authors of those documents conformed to an 18th-century understanding of the term and regarded the prospect of rule by the people as tantamount to anarchy. It took decades of political, economic and social change to redefine democracy away from an inherently unstable form of government and make it the bedrock of American politics. Or so goes the usual historical narrative. According to Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, however, the notion that "the United States is a democracy today" is as much a myth as the assumption that the founding generation ever wanted it to be one.

Isenberg and Burstein, who have both separately and together written several notable books about America's founders, present their provocative argument in "The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality." This detailed "interdependent portrait" of John and John Quincy Adams tracks the careers of the equally ambitious father and son, who both rose to the nation's highest office and were ousted after a single term. Criticized by contemporaries and posterity alike for their difficult personalities, the two Adamses certainly nurtured a powerful sense of grievance as they assessed the political developments of their day. Yet their curmudgeonly characters likely predisposed them to discern genuine problems in government that their adversaries preferred to exploit for their own advantage rather than correct for the good of the nation.

Born 31 years apart in Braintree, Mass., the two Adamses stayed connected to their New England roots, no matter how far from home they journeyed. And journey they did, beginning with John Adams's decision to bring his 10-year-old son along on a diplomatic mission to Paris in 1778. Both of them subsequently lived for extended periods in the Netherlands and England, and John Quincy went on to represent American interests in Berlin and St. Petersburg for more than a decade.

The remarkable parallels between their careers extended beyond lengthy European travels and one-term presidencies. Both men negotiated peace between the United States and Britain — John in 1783, with the Treaty of Paris ending the War of Independence, and John Quincy in 1814, with the Treaty of Ghent concluding the War of 1812. Each served as America's minister to the Court of St. James's. Drawing on a shared love of classical learning, especially Cicero's exhortations to put nation above self, the two Adamses also regularly took up their pens to expose ominous developments that in their view imperiled the young Republic.

Neither man questioned the necessity of popular consent, but both thought democracy ought to be just one part of a properly balanced government. Around the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, John argued that a new national legislature must have a senate with "illustrious" and well-educated members serving as a counterweight to representatives elected to a lower house by "credulous" voters. Nearly 40 years later, in his 1825 Inaugural Address, John Quincy seemingly diverged from his father's discomfort with a fickle populace by commending "a confederated representative democracy" that had proved itself "competent to the wise and orderly management of the common concerns of a mighty nation." Yet he delivered this speech in the wake of the highly contentious election of 1824, decided not by the voters but by the House of Representatives, when no candidate won a majority in the Electoral College. None of John Quincy's opponents — least of all his archrival Andrew Jackson — would have agreed that the voice of the people had actually been heard.

Jackson, however, epitomized the dangers of an unchecked democracy. The belligerent Tennessean, who defeated Adams in a landslide in 1828, joined a parade of charismatic figures who over the years brazenly courted popular opinion to distract voters from recognizing the Adamses' superior claims to leadership — at least from their own jaundiced perspective. First in line was a lazy and flirtatious Benjamin Franklin, whom John Adams accused of hogging the limelight when the pair sought a wartime alliance with France. Father and son later agreed — with barely disguised envy — that the renown enjoyed by John Hancock and Thomas Paine was undeserved. "It is melancholy to observe," the younger Adams groused, "how much even in this free country the course of public events depends on the private interests and passions of individuals."

What transformed a vexing cultivation of celebrity into genuine peril for the Republic was the rise of political parties, which deliberately appealed to the "passions" of voters rather than their good judgment. Members of the founding generation abhorred the very idea of party, a term that conjured up shady cabals placing self-interest ahead of the public good. But parties emerged nonetheless, beginning with the Federalists and Republicans in the 1790s. A flood of partisan newspapers widened the political divide, stirring up the populace to worship some men as heroes and denounce their opponents as villains. John Adams's effort to rise above the fray while in office only served to make him a target for both factions' leaders, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Matters had worsened by the second Adams's presidency. The Jeffersonian Republicans renamed themselves Democrats to advertise their anti-elitist devotion to the people and immediately started a campaign to elect their champion, Andrew Jackson. A relentlessly partisan press manipulated readers' loyalty with appeals to emotion, exaggerations and outright lies. According to one senator appalled by Jackson's authoritarian bent once he achieved office, "The more arbitrary the measures become the less the laws, the Constitution and the principles of civil liberty are regarded."

Sound familiar? Although the current occupant of the White House is nowhere mentioned by name in this book, his prodigious shadow looms large. The trends that so distressed the Adamses

in the nation's early years have intensified to a degree they could scarcely have imagined, thanks to virulent social media, the injection of vast sums of money into American campaigns, a politicized judiciary and rising economic inequality. We can only be grateful that father and son were spared this vision of their worst fears coming true.

Washington, Jefferson and other prominent early Americans (with the likely exception of Jackson) would no doubt be equally horrified by modern developments. But would a 21st-century version of either Adams — or of Washington — be able to redirect the nation away from destructive partisanship toward a disinterested pursuit of a common good? Despite the contemporary inspiration for their positive reassessment of the Adamses, Isenberg and Burstein wisely avoid making such a claim. If there is any lesson to be derived from this book, they assert, it is that the Adamses "were onto something when they observed that the errors of the people threatened 'government by the people.'" This leaves open the possibility that the people might have the capacity to recognize their mistakes and correct them — a democratic solution to the problem of democracy. Even the famously dour Adamses might be tempted to hope for such an outcome, however unlikely it seems at present.

Virginia DeJohn Anderson's latest book is "The Martyr and the Traitor: Nathan Hale, Moses Dunbar, and the American Revolution."

THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY
The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality
By Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein
543 pp. Viking. $35.