

Your Personal Coach

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In 2003 I published a book called *Living a Connected Life: Creating and Maintaining Relationships That Last*. In this work I described the declining social connections felt by Americans, laid out some strategies for making our personal lives richer in terms of felt connections to others, and gave lots of evidence to support the importance of social capital and feelings of belongingness. After my book was published, I had a challenging conversation with a magazine editor who said, "There's no real, compelling evidence that people are becoming more socially isolated or that it even matters that much." I could write more than a few columns about this guy and his cluelessness, but I'll spare you and instead I'll just reach for the data.

A recent study that has been getting lots of media buzz in *USA Today*, *Time Magazine*, network news, and elsewhere confirms those facts. Research published just last week in the *American Sociological Review* found that our social contacts are dwindling and that Americans have fewer confidants and that those ties are more family-based than they used to be. Sociology professor Lynn Smith-Lovin and her colleagues at Duke University (along with other researchers at the University of Arizona) conducted face-to-face interviews with roughly 1500 people and compared those results with a similar interview from 1985. In the twenty years between the studies, these results showed that Americans have a third fewer close friends and fewer contacts with clubs and neighbors. The number of people who say they have no one with whom to discuss important matters more than doubled to nearly 25%. What that says is that one in four of us don't have anyone we can confide in about our lives. For an increasingly large number of people – and in spite of Internet-based social networking opportunities like Myspace and Facebook -- there is no one to call for comfort when things hit the fan, no one to call to share a great success.

In short, Americans are becoming increasingly lonely. This new study along with research presented six years ago by Robert Putnam and popularized in his book *Bowling Alone*, shows clearly that baby boomers are more socially isolated than their parents and that their Gen-X kids are lonelier still. And it does matter. People who have strong and vital connections to others live longer, healthier, and happier lives. Here are some factoids about the power of social capital for individuals and communities.

- ? Quitting smoking or joining a club, it's a tough call which would improve your life expectancy more.
- ? Joining one group cuts your odds of dying over the next year in half. Joining two groups cuts it by three quarters.
- ? Each 10 minutes of additional commuting time cuts all forms of social capital by 10 percent-- 10 percent less church-going, 10 percent fewer club meetings, 10 percent fewer evenings with friends, etc.

- ? The best predictor of tax evasion is the number of times annually that one gives the finger to another driver, and social capital is the best variable to successfully predict levels of tax compliance state-by-state.
- ? TV is the only leisure activity where doing more of it is associated with lower social capital.
- ? If you had to choose between 10% more cops on the beat or 10% more citizens knowing their neighbors' first names, the latter is a better crime prevention strategy.
- ? If you had to choose between 10% more teachers or 10% more parents being involved in their kids' education, the latter is a better route to educational achievement.

A story from India cuts right to the heart of all this information. Once upon a time, there was a young apprentice who was always complaining about the difficulties of life. Early one morning, his ancient Hindu master sent the young man to town to buy a bag of salt. When he returned, the master put a handful of the salt in a glass of water and asked the apprentice to drink it.

“How does it taste,” asked the master.

“It’s bitter,” said the apprentice as he spat the salty water onto the ground.

The master smiled and walked toward a nearby lake. When they arrived at the edge of the water, the master asked the apprentice to take another handful of salt and throw it into the lake. The apprentice did not understand the lesson he was learning, but he did so at his master’s request.

“Now drink from this water,” the master said.

As the young man drank, the master asked, “How does it taste?”

“Fresh and sweet,” the young man replied.

“Do you taste the salt?”

“No.”

The master sat beside the young man and offered his teaching. “The pain of life is pure salt; no more no less. The amount of pain in life remains exactly the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things. Stop being a glass. Become a lake.

So ask yourself: Is my life more like a glass or a lake?

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