

Competition and Cooperation

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Like most nations and cultures, American consciousness and unconsciousness encompass a wide range of assumptions and beliefs. Some of our beliefs are complementary; others are contradictory. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a dramatic spotlight on some of the best and worst of these. In this commentary, I want to revisit two facets that motivate us in ways that are not to our credit and need to change if we are to create a better future.

America is a nation where *selfishness* and *greed* have corrupted many of our ideals. You may ask, how can this be so? Are not tens of millions of Americans, perhaps even hundreds of millions of us, generous and loving? Well, sort of. That depends on how we define generosity and love.

If expressing kindness and consideration toward a small number of people — biological family, spouses and children, personal friends and colleagues — is our definition of generosity and love, then yes, the percentages are extremely high, probably 98%. If, however, we extend those boundaries to include all the people we don't know, then our willingness to express loving generosity diminishes alarmingly.

American ideals are built around a few essential ideas — freedom, individuality, opportunity, industry, and equality all conspicuous among them. But we have misunderstood and warped the first two of those ideals while never quite accepting or believing the last two. Throughout American history, freedom and individuality have too often meant permission to pursue wealth without any limits, and with little or no concern for the collective, the greater good, the health of society, nor balance and harmony with the natural world.

Sure, neoliberal capitalism lets people off the hook by offering the comforting justification of “trickle down” in its tenet that concentrated personal wealth serves the greater good by creating jobs, but that's a bunch of hooey. Basically, American belief in freedom and individuality have come to mean “*I'm gonna get everything I can for myself and the few people I love, and everyone else can go screw themselves.*” We don't go around proclaiming that overtly because it's bad public relations, and it may be largely unconscious (since we like to see ourselves as generous and loving), but there's more than a grain of truth in it for too many of us among both the Haves and Have Nots.

Certainly many millions of Americans believe that selfishness is neither wise nor virtuous. And they attempt to counter that belief, to wrest it away from general acceptance and minimize its impact on society. They do this not only by their own individual actions, but often by getting together with like-minded individuals in groups and formal organizations that lobby for a more compassionate collectivist approach to community and society. The problem is that those efforts have relatively little impact in changing the status quo of systemic selfishness and underlying greed.

The people who wield the most power in our country tend to be committed to selfishness and greed. Oh, they don't admit that, of course — even to themselves, much less to others — but it's patently obvious from their actions. Some of them believe fervently in social darwinism: dog-eat-dog, life-as-a-jungle, a few winners and a lot of losers. They regard that as natural and correct, effectively the best of all possible worlds. Many others in the centers of power are not so sure that unfettered self-interest is a good thing, but they accept that this is the way life has always been in civilization and is likely to remain how things are. So, they play the game according to the unconsciously accepted rules, that it's OK to go after everything you can get for yourself.

A dear friend of mine called me recently and suggested in the strongest possible terms that, since my modest livelihood as an astrologer (about \$25,000 a year, plus another eight grand from Social Security) amounts to a single proprietor business, I should apply for a Payroll Protection Loan. That's one facet of the massive government stimulus authorized to alleviate the economic shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. My friend is a cultural progressive, a political liberal, owns a very nice house outright with no mortgage, and has a net worth in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, but he's still obsessed with money and fearful of not having enough. He called the Payroll Protection Program's forgivable loans "free money" and urged me to get my share.

I told him I'd think about it, but that was a lie. I don't need to think about it — I won't apply. First, there's no such thing as "free money" in my conception of reality and second, the idea that (in his words) "everyone is doing it" is a terrible reason to do anything. Yes, I think there's a strong chance that America and the world are headed into an economic depression the likes of which we've never seen, and I'm not wealthy, but I simply don't need any more money than I have at this point. The problem with greed, however, is that no amount of money is ever enough.

In America, we've seen an explosion over the past four decades in both traditional Christianity and New Age Metaphysics of doctrines promoting "universal abundance" — the belief that material wealth is infinite if we can just tap into it. Nonsense. While that might be useful for those grappling with fear, anxiety, or dread about being "worthless," it opens the door and invites greed in. We need to work on more equitable distribution of existing wealth, not increasing our wealth to infinity.

Underlying much of this is the assumption that competition is a reigning impulse of our basic nature. Not true. Throughout the 200,000-year history of creatures we regard as human, during the overwhelming bulk of that time we were more cooperative than competitive. For all but the last ten to twelve millennia, humans lived in small, kinship-based groups as hunter-forager-horticulturalists. While competition was a valid dimension of our psyches, cooperation was essential to nurturing family and protecting community. Wars were unknown and inter-group conflicts avoided as much as possible, since such violent confrontations were unproductive to everyone.

What changed 12,000 years ago was the beginning of civilization. How did that come about? Through agriculture — arguably humanity's greatest mistake. Horticulture (small-scale gardening) is natural and beneficent. Agriculture (large-scale monoculture farming) is unnatural and toxic. I'm not down on farmers, by the way, but I'm sure as hell no fan of modern agri-business.

Agriculture led to a cascade of new developments: private ownership of land; domestication of animals for labor; larger and more permanent settlements; surpluses of food; markets and commerce; money as a medium of exchange; and social inequality. Each step in that chain changed the balance of cooperation-versus-competition by altering the dynamic of Us-versus-Them. Humans cooperate with those we consider Us and compete against those we consider Them.

Along the way, increasing competition emphasized the masculine side of human nature. Diminishing cooperation devalued the feminine side. Since women have the babies and raise them, they became the central focus of a smaller Us — nuclear family. Men became the dominant rulers who protected Us from Them. We've altered that equation a little over the past century, but not much. Imbalances in our evaluation of gender still plague civilization.

If we are to survive the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic chaos that is unfolding and will surely worsen, we need to consider a fundamental rebalancing of competition and cooperation. "Freedom" and "individuality" may not be quite on their deathbeds, but they must be redefined in more limited context and expressed in much saner ways.

Can we achieve these changes as a society, a civilization, and a species? Will we? I don't know. It's a tall order, and the odds may be slim, but we'd damn well better try.