

The Conundrum of Belonging

by Bill Herbst

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America does not care about people. Not those of other countries, nor its own. Now, by “America,” what I really mean is Americans — not all of us, of course, but definitely some of us, possibly a lot of us, and maybe even most of us.

What Americans care about is money, along with the relatively few people we love — spouses, family, friends, colleagues. People we know. People we like. Everyone else can go take a flying leap at a rolling doughnut for all most Americans care. Oh sure, if we see a story on the mainstream media about other Americans suffering from a disaster — like in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans — we’ll get in our cars and drive halfway across the country to help. Then we care, because people who were “Them” have been magically transformed into “Us.” In that instance, we’ll put their own butts on the line, or we’ll take out our wallets and send money for relief. Our generosity for “Us” is almost unlimited.

But in normal times, during “business-as-usual,” which is to say, most of the time, Americans are not much interested in making life better for other human beings, certainly not those in other cultures and countries, but also not even our fellow Americans. Time and again, over and over and over, we choose what will make us the most money. American society has been built on that presumption.

Look at our country — all of it, cities, towns, suburbs, rural areas. It’s designed for cars, not for people. Everything we build throughout America is done for the convenience of the automobile. Why? Because, for the past century, cars are where the money has been. We don’t do mass transit in America. We don’t design cities or neighborhoods for foot traffic. With few exceptions, our cities, towns, and suburbs do not foster a healthy sense of social interaction and belonging. Rather than encourage us to be together, they separate us.

Next, consider the virtual reality of video. This began with the astonishing but primitive early technology of television, way back in the 1920s and ‘30s. By the time the technology was ready for market in the late 1940s, Americans were ripe for this new entertainment medium. We took to TV like ducks take to water. Nowhere else in the world did television achieve the power and ubiquity it did in America. We became TV Nation.

That was followed over the next 30 years by personal computers, the internet, smart phones, and social media. Today, when some American — anyone, really, adults, teenagers, even old people — walks down a street, odds are fairly good that the person will be looking at a video screen.

My point in all this is that America is the most alienated culture on earth. More than any other society, we are a nation of people whose authentic social bonds have been diminished and weakened, replaced with an ersatz substitute.

Humans are social animals. Just like cows, we like standing around with other cows in the pasture. Our evolution has resulted in our being hard-wired to need a sense of belonging, both warm (intimate) and cool (social). Some would argue that for all the brouhaha that attends one-to-one intimacy — romantic and sexual, the whole "*you and me, Babe*" thing — more generalized belonging in family, kinship, friendship, and social groups is even more important.

The problem is that these bonds of belonging are strongest, most durable, and healthiest when founded on direct human contact. All the contradictions, paradoxes, difficulties, and general messiness of real human interaction have the overall effect of keeping us connected to our hearts first and our heads second. We may not like that, and it doesn't always succeed, but it provides definite benefits. Real human interaction forces us to find a way to get along, to accept, and even to like each other in spite of everything — the fact that we're all fallible, we all have feet of clay, and we're all assholes from time to time (and more often than just occasionally for some of us).

This changes when our primary source of belonging is virtual rather than real. As our social connections become less tangible, meaning with people we know, and more virtual, meaning with people we don't really know (although we may think we do), our sense of belonging shifts from the heart to the head. Our experience of belonging becomes more ideological than emotional.

Interacting face-to-face in real life invokes many dimensions of connection. We are aware of some of these, but not others, and yet all those dimensions contribute to the experience of belonging. It is made fuller, literally "fleshed out." When our interactions with others are virtual rather than face-to-face, the many points of our connectedness are reduced, diminished. They lose their multi-dimensionality, becoming more one-dimensional. Curiously, that artificiality may please us, for it's easier than the truer, more natural alternative.

This "virtualized alienation" can result (and too often does) in our negatively judging other people — people we don't really know or have to get along with — as terrible, even "evil" human beings who are unworthy of our consideration, respect, or love, and who might even be good candidates for assassination. That murderous judgment seems a bit extreme, until we realize how many humans have been killed by other humans over the past century or so, sometimes without the slightest shred of remorse. And America has certainly done its share of this killing.

In today's America, a characteristic manifestation of this is knee-jerk hatred of those with whom we disagree. I'm not necessarily shocked by that, but I am disappointed by the apparent ease with which Americans are divided into various tribal silos in ways that are not merely biased and dismissive,

but blindly partisan to the point of revulsion for anyone and everyone not on their “team.”

Our wish for simplistic certainty or good and evil painted in white and black isn't a new or recent phenomenon in America or elsewhere. One might presume from the way I've framed the issue over the first two pages of this commentary that I'd like to see us return to the kind of America we had when I was born or even before that. And yes, I cannot deny that I'm a dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying luddite from way back. I'm definitely not a techno-evangelist nor a fervent proponent of artificial intelligence. Hell, I'm not sure I even believe in “progress.”

Nonetheless, the mythology of old-timey, small-town America — before television and smartphones and social media, where everyone supposedly knew their neighbors — wasn't so great either. The idea that we once “got along with each other” is more myth than reality. But then, human social belonging has always been difficult, fractured, and less than ideal. The problem is that the culture we've created in modern America has made our collective experience of belonging worse rather than better. Americans were divided in the past, but we're even more divided now. Going back (even if we could) wouldn't solve our problems.

Our need for togetherness and community is greater than ever, but the ways we've tried to foster that in society have exacerbated rather than relieved the Us-versus-Them dilemma. Our alienation is extreme, and too much of what we think of these days as belonging is artificial or outright false. Given that terrible conundrum, I feel forced to retreat once again to the last bastion of my understanding, namely, that the only effective way for us to move toward a more loving and compassionate perspective on our shared interactions is by doing the hard inner work of maturity, which boils down to the slow pace of one person at a time. And that won't be fast enough, given that any hope of our collectively saving ourselves from all the various disasters of our own making is already past us and now fast receding in the rear-view mirror. Call it whatever we will — collapse, disintegration, breaking down, cracking up — it's already happening.

The upshot here is that our time is probably limited, perhaps more severely than we realize, so we'd be well advised to make every minute count. What this means practically is that we need to express as much of the love in our hearts as we can, in whatever ways are meaningful to us. For some of us, however, even that might be asking too much. In that case, the fallback position is simply to do as little harm as possible. If we can't make things better, at least let's not make them worse.

I'd like to think we could do more than that, but I guess that will have to be enough.