

Modern Kinship: On Revitalizing Community and Connection

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This is a thinkpiece. Views expressed are my own.

Many years ago, my father told me he lived in a commune composed of young Christians united by God's word. I was shocked to learn that my dad had been in a cult.

Evidently, today I find myself fascinated by community, connection, and compassion, and how they circulate in Western societies. Robert D. Putnam, political scientist, explores community values in the United States in his book *Bowling Alone*. The title stems from one interesting development: bowling was once a social activity, played by several tight-knit teams, and over a few decades, it radically transformed into a solitary hobby. But this is not unique to bowling, as Putnam observes declining membership at churches, community centers, youth clubs, parent-teacher groups, sports teams, volunteering associations - the list goes on. This decline in social connectedness has inundated many developed countries, from around the 1970s on.

Around the same time period, disconnectedness was not only observed on a large scale – within clubs

and organizations – but also on an individual level. In *Lonely Century*, economist Noreena Hertz researches the recent epidemic of loneliness. Hertz defines loneliness broadly. Loneliness could mean feeling disconnected from friends and family, but it could also mean feeling disconnected from your society, work, or government. However the feeling comes about, there are clear linkages between loneliness and mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Hertz explains that since loneliness started being measured in the 1970s, it has been increasing steadily, accelerating since around 2010, and accelerating after the pandemic. In 2021, the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that “36% of all Americans—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—feel ‘serious loneliness.’” This demonstrates that loneliness disproportionately harms those who are most vulnerable.

Not only does loneliness affect mental health, but physical health too: people that feel cared about can cope with stress better, and therefore suffer less from related health issues. They are also more likely to take good care of themselves because they know that they are needed by other people. This does not have a negligible effect on the economy: the New Economics Foundation estimated that loneliness costs UK businesses around GBP 2.5 billion annually, due to healthcare, absences, and losses in productivity.

Social scientists and economists have hypothesized several reasons for this declining social connectedness: the rise of the internet, urbanization, secularism, to name a few. And while these factors have likely played a role, perhaps what is most relevant is the truth that this was a decision willfully made.

Across nations, individuals have chosen mobility and autonomy over collectivism. The less one must look out for others, the more boundless life becomes. Why then, should the status quo be amended? Though modern societies largely value independence, surely this does not need to come at the cost of ravaging disconnection and loneliness. And practically speaking, a functional and thriving society must be underpinned by the emotional and psychological well-being of its people. This has prompted public and private efforts aimed at bringing people together. Voting and volunteering are promoted to connect citizens to their local communities. Tax and unemployment policies are put in place to reduce inequalities have more citizens stand on common ground. Social networks that connect people with shared interests sprout up all the time. These and similar efforts are important, but perhaps we are neglecting something much more fundamental.

The Private Sphere

Kristen Ghodsee, in her book *Everyday Utopia*, suggests precisely this when she writes “today's future positive writers critique our economies, while largely seeming to ignore that anything might be amiss in our private lives.” Ghodsee claims that rather than reforming the institutions in the public sphere, it is family and home life that ought to be reformed.

Before such reforms can be discussed, it is relevant to understand how the family has been shaped by history. David Brooks, writer and political commentator, writes about this fascinating evolution in his article, *The Nuclear Family was a Mistake*. He explains that in the nineteenth century, many people lived in sprawling extended families. Children, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and

family-adjacent friends all shared a home. Then, industrialization uprooted many people and brought them to cities. By the twentieth century, the typical family size had shrunk down to two married parents and a few kids. The nuclear family was popular and prosperous for an ephemeral period, but it has been breaking apart since the sixties and seventies. Brooks supports this by demonstrating that the past few decades have been characterized by higher divorces, fewer marriages, lower birth rates, and more estrangement. In sum, Western societies have witnessed the family become smaller and more fragmented.

This development seems to be overlooked in discussions about community. The discussion often revolves around connecting families, and it is rarely questioned if families lack connection *internally*, within the walls of their homes. I would argue that many families are quietly suffering because their support network is small and weak. This was the beauty of extended families; individuals were surrounded by an abundance of care, support, and helping hands. Even so, I find it neither possible nor necessarily beneficial to revert to this structure. It is fantastic that families can be mobile and opportunity-seeking, and this need not be inhibited.

I am not advocating for a revival of the nuclear family either. According to Brooks, marriages were strong in the mid-century because people were committed to the institution of marriage. Some couples stayed married purely for tax benefits. Now however, one expects marriage to enrich life with fulfillment and love, and if a marriage ceases to do this, it will likely end. Joshua Coleman, psychologist, explains that parenting also had a pragmatic definition: a parent was to raise children into functional members

of society and the labor force. Today, most people believe that a parent should also love their child deeply, ensure their mental well-being and happiness, and give them the freedom to become their own person.

So while increasing divorce and estrangement may sound negative, I would argue that this is largely reflective of a society that is actually seeking *more* care and connection and not less. After enduring disconnection and loneliness, many people are on the hunt for a support network. But it is not desirable nor realistic to revert to collectivism, ceding mobility and freedom. Individuals are eager to find a family structure at the intersection of togetherness and autonomy. So the remaining question is how then, can family be redefined?

Chosen families

Many years after my father mentioned his communal living experience, I developed a newfound curiosity. Asking him for more details, my father reminisced upon the dinners he would joyfully prepare for the group of young singles, couples, and families. As an impassioned chef, he handled most of the cooking, and was grateful that others had expertise in child-rearing, gardening, maintenance, plumbing and so on. The members of this small commune shared care, resources, chores, prayers, and listening ears. They were a harmonious, familial group.

Interestingly, there has recently been a rise in such communal living arrangements. After decades of disconnectedness and loneliness, communes are sprouting up here and there, urban and rural, big and small. Many people are redefining their own notion of family by choosing who they share their lives with. Ghodsee observes that modern-day com-

munes, unlike most historic ones, primarily share care, chores, and favors, while employment, finances, and property are private. This allows individuals to synthesize two meaningful things: the support network that an extended family offers and the independence that the nuclear family offers.

Established communes are witnessing a revitalization, while entirely new ones are being built from the ground up. For example, rural communes called *kibbutzim* started bespattering Israel more than a century ago. Recently, *The Times of Israel* reported a wave of new people opting for this communal lifestyle, with the number of families moving to *kibbutzim* doubling since the pandemic. In *How We Live Now*, social psychologist Bella DePaulo explains that cohousing became popular in Denmark in the 1970s. The Danish state supported and funded these living communities, and today, there are over 700 communes there, a number which is steadily growing. American universities have long featured student cohousing and community-focused campuses. In Switzerland's Gattikon, the neighborhood is composed of small flats with big common areas and shared kitchens, to promote social connection.

DePaulo also highlights some communes with unique concepts: the website CoAbode connects single mothers to live and raise children together. In Japan, Seattle, and Chicago, there are communes that house foster children and retirees together, as they each enrich one another's lives in distinctive ways. Ecovillages have been formed in more rural areas, where all members live together to reduce their collective carbon footprint.

Whatever shape the community takes, one thing is clear: society is finally starting to witness a more

widespread, free-flowing exchange of support - not just within one's nuclear family, but extended generously to relatives, friends, and strangers. Previous family structures have poorly satisfied hunting hearts, and it is time action is taken to expand households and create wider networks of care.

Moving Forward

It may sound utopic, to synthesize communal care with independence and privacy, but the successful living experiments show that it is possible. It takes, however, substantial effort to allow these arrangements to grow and flourish. Ghodsee argues that the actual architecture required to live communally is scarce. Most neighborhoods and apartment buildings are not designed for chosen families to thrive. National and local governments, companies, and individuals can collaborate to make this option more accessible.

The private sphere has largely been untouched by public policy. But looking after the private sphere is just as important as the public sphere. For example, when someone loses their job, a monthly wire transfer does not constitute a robust safety net - just as important is a home-cooked meal and a pair of listening ears. Or, when it comes to housing, the forefront concern is keeping rents under control. But cohousing reduces the cost of living substantially, because expenses and living space are shared among members. The state can support the construction of cohousing facilities or convert abandoned buildings into coliving communities. Local organizations can connect individuals that may be compatible to live together.

There is also an abundance of self-driven actions that can be taken. Anyone with an empty room in

their house can welcome someone into their family. I would urge individuals to embrace a wider definition of family. By constricting ourselves to a narrow definition - of family, of marriage, of child-rearing - we are limiting the circulation of compassion and camaraderie. Open your door, cook a big dinner, babysit, offer your time, become someone's confidant - all of these actions can infuse love and community back into societies that are facing a drought.

If we relinquish our attachment to conventional relational and familial structures, we do not relinquish connectedness. Rather, we submerge ourselves in wider networks of love and care. We construct a society where safety nets are strongest in the very place they are needed most: at home.

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