

# The Limits of Individualism

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

May 5, 2024

Each year, I donate a “sermon of your choice” to the auction. Ray Wilson won this year. He chose the topic of “The Limits of Liberalism” based on an essay by David Brooks. This one is for you, Ray.

Did you ever stop and think about what a strange salutation “Hello” is? Its use as a greeting began in the 1870’s with the advent of the telephone. Before the late 1800’s “Ahoy” and “Hail” were commonly used as a greeting. “Hello” was used to indicate surprise. “Hello, I didn’t expect to see you here!” or to get someone’s attention, “Hello, you’re about to trip over that curb.”

The way people greet one another varies from culture to culture. In India and Nepal people say “Namaste,” meaning I bow to the light in you. In Italy you kiss both cheeks, as Dorothy Fairweather always reminds me. Bowing is used as a greeting and sign of respect in Eastern Asia.

Instead of “Hello” in South Africa, people greet one another by saying “Sawu bona” which translates as “I see you.” The reply to this is “Sikhona,” which translates as “I am here.” This exchange of greeting originated in the times when South Africans would look far across a desert and note the first appearance of someone walking toward their village.

Melissa Rose Williamson taught me this at the first Transgender Day of Visibility flag-raising in Newburyport. I think it is beautiful. It creates connection and reciprocity.

Let’s try it.

(speaking to congregation)

I’ll greet you with “I see you” and you reply with “I am here.”

I see you.

(pause)

(response)

I am here.

Now turn to the person next to you.

I see you.

I am here.

Turn to someone else.

I see you.

I am here.

And one last time all together. This time: I see you. We are here.

I see you.

We are here.

Thank you.

Disconnection, or detachment, is one of the results that stems from individualism taken to an extreme. Connection is the answer.

Individualism was one of the core beliefs of America’s white founders and leaders. John Stuart Mill’s 1858 book *On Liberty* is a seminal document in our liberal worldview. In this work, Mills argued for the rights of individuals to “be the architect of their own life” and asserted that states should not have the authority to interfere with an individual’s rights unless a person was harming another person. Mills believed that a society built on those ideals would nurture creative and brave individuals.

In his article “The Outer Limits of Liberalism,” David Brooks argues that Mill’s understanding of liberalism based on individualism is the liberalism we are often fighting for to protect democracy, for example. He also believes that we have taken it too far and are paying the consequences.

Brooks writes, “The freedom of choice that liberals celebrate can be turned into a rigid free- market ideology that enables the rich to concentrate economic power while the vulnerable are abandoned.”<sup>1</sup>

His solution is to foster a culture that values what he calls “gift-based liberalism” as opposed to how we live now which he calls “autonomy-based liberalism.”

Autonomy-based liberalism is based on beliefs

1 David Brooks, “The Outer Limits of Liberalism,” *The Atlantic*, June 2023.

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founded in individualism. "I am a piece of property that I possess...The purpose of my life...is to be happy—to live a life in which my pleasures, however I define them, exceed my pains."<sup>2</sup>

Gifts-based liberalism has different core beliefs including:

*I am part of a long procession of humanity.*

*The essential activity of life is not the pursuit of individual happiness.*

*The essential activity of life is to realize the gifts I've been given by my ancestors, and to pass them along, suitably improved, to those who will come after...*

*We are citizens and family members, not just individuals and property owners.*

*We have obligations to our neighbors...and to those who will come after us.*<sup>3</sup>

Autonomy-based individualism is foundational to the world views of many Americans, especially white Americans or those who are not deeply rooted to different beliefs and traditions of other cultures.

A current example of the effects of individualism taken too far is the epidemic of loneliness we are experiencing. Although independence and self-reliance are positive and healthy, taken to an extreme they result in loneliness and feelings of separation. Rates of loneliness are staggering. Studies vary, but we can say with certainty that at least one in three Americans is "seriously lonely." This is true across ages and life stages. People sometimes link the loneliness epidemic to the social isolation necessitated by COVID. I think it has deeper roots and started long before that. The pandemic exaggerated or accelerated what was already happening in our society.

Another term for this lack of connection is atomization. Put simply, atomization describes a whole system, community, or culture that has been broken down into subunits. What was once an interconnected web becomes a group of isolated individuals. Writer and coach Willow Liana says that we are in a crisis of atomization and

2 Brooks, "Liberalism."

3 Brooks, "Liberalism."

that we "lack the social technology which at one time would have bound us together."<sup>4</sup>

This syndrome is seen in today's work environment too. In an article entitled "Working Alone," Douglas Young outlines how so many employees are working by themselves, at home or in an office. I see this with my 30-year-old stepson who works remotely and has never met the people he works with. They do all their teamwork on Zoom, with their cameras off!

Young reminds us that "socializing at work and for the purpose of work is the medium through which trust, solidarity, and unity is transmitted."<sup>5</sup> These are costly social skills to lose.

This extreme individualism is different in other cultures. Leadership executive Juana Bordas describes Latino culture as a "we" culture. Babies are loved and often raised by an entire community; they are passed around at every gathering and called precious by everyone. "People anxiously wait to sing to the baby...They are bounced from lap to lap...When the music starts, they are sashayed on the dance floor and rocked to a ranchero or salsa beat."<sup>6</sup> This is collective caring.

The truth is that we are not isolated units, we are deeply interconnected with the world we live in and the people, near and far. Feeling a sense of belonging within a community, or communities, helps us to thrive. This is evident in nature. Trees are not individuals, though they may look like it as they tower over us. Aspen trees, the largest

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4 Willow Liana, "All the Lonely People: The Atomized Generation," *Erraticus*, March 11, 2020. <https://erraticus.co/2020/03/11/atomized-generation-community-atomization-loneliness/>

5 Douglas Young, "Working Alone: Atomized and Desocialized Production as an Obstacle to Power," *Spectre Journal*, April 21, 2022. <https://spectrejournal.com/atomized-and-desocialized-production-as-an-obstacle-to-power/>

6 Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).

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organism on earth, are connected underground by a vast interconnected system of roots.

Hyper-individualism by its nature promotes comparison and striving to be better or stronger than the person beside you. Living as part of a highly individualistic culture also results in chronic stress and dysregulated nervous systems. After all, the world is pretty scary if I believe it's all up to me or that I am on my own.

Gifts-based liberalism, which is also the norm in indigenous cultures, recognizes that my life is a gift, freely given. I didn't earn the right to exist, and I don't have to earn my dignity—and neither do you.

Our lives and our minds are not islands; they are deeply influenced by our ancestors, our cultures, and our surroundings. None of us are truly independent. We need one another.

Our survival depends upon others. How we live and the choices we make affects others and nature. These understandings affect how we raise our children, treat our neighbors, and how we treat the Earth.

Living as part of a community and feeling the truth that we are not alone is incredibly liberating. This may seem paradoxical to a mindset of extreme individualism.

Let's be compassionate with ourselves, friends. We did not create this way of thinking, though we are prey to its insidious nature. We can experience the gifts of belonging, being seen, and living together here at the FRS. There are many ways that this is true.

For example, on Tuesday, May 14 at 1pm in the Lower Meetinghouse we will gather as a community and learn how to plan our own memorial services. We will listen to ourselves, and to one another. We will learn about others and share our deepest wishes for how we wish our life to be celebrated and remembered. I hope you will join us, regardless of your age! This is a spiritual practice and will hopefully strengthen your feeling of belonging.

Understanding the risks of extreme individualism will not change it. For change to happen, we need to practice new ways of thinking and acting.

Let's start by seeing each other and being seen, and in so doing, feeling our deep and lasting interconnectedness.

Please join me...

"I see you" (open arms to congregation)

"We are here."

Yes, we are.

Amen.