

# A Nation of Weavers

The social renaissance is happening from the ground up.



**By David Brooks**

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I start with the pain. A couple times a week I give a speech somewhere in the country about social isolation and social fragmentation. Very often a parent comes up to me afterward and says, “My daughter took her life when she was 14.” Or, “My son died of an overdose when he was 20.”

Their eyes flood with tears. I don’t know what to say. I squeeze a shoulder just to try to be present with them, but the crying does not stop. As it turns to weeping they rush out of the auditorium and I am left with my own futility. What can I say to these parents? What can I say to the parents still around who don’t yet know they may soon become those parents?

**This kind of pain is an epidemic in our society.** When you cover the sociology beat as I do, you see other kinds of pain. The African-American woman in Greenville who is indignant because young black kids in her neighborhood face injustice just as gross as she did in 1953. The college student in the Midwest who is convinced that she is the only one haunted by compulsive thoughts about her own worthlessness. The Trump-supporting small-business man in Louisiana who silently clenches his fists in rage as guests at a dinner party disparage his whole way of life.

**These different kinds of pain share a common thread: our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, distrust, tribalism, shaming and strife.**

On Dec. 7, 1941, countless Americans saw that their nation was in peril and walked into recruiting stations. We don’t have anything as dramatic as Pearl Harbor, but when 47,000 Americans kill themselves every year and 72,000 more die from drug addiction, isn’t that a silent Pearl Harbor? When the basic norms of decency, civility and truthfulness are under threat, isn’t that a silent Pearl Harbor? Aren’t we all called at moments like these to do something extra?

My something extra was starting something nine months ago at the Aspen Institute called [Weave: The Social Fabric Project](#). **The first core idea was that social isolation is the problem underlying a lot of our other problems. The second idea was that this**

problem is being solved by people around the country, at the local level, who are building community and weaving the social fabric. How can we learn from their example and nationalize their effect?

We traveled around the country and found them everywhere. We'd plop into big cities like Houston and small towns like Wilkesboro, N.C., and we'd find 25 to 100 community "Weavers" almost immediately. This is a movement that doesn't know it's a movement.

Some of them work at organizations: a vet who helps other mentally ill vets in New Orleans; a guy who runs a boxing gym in Appalachian Ohio where he nominally teaches young men boxing, but really teaches them life; a woman who was in the process of leaving the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago when she saw two little girls playing with broken bottles in the empty lot across the street. She turned to her husband and said: We're not moving away from that. We're not going to be just another family that abandoned this place.

Many others do their weaving in the course of everyday life — because that's what neighbors do. One lady in Florida said she doesn't have time to volunteer, but that's because she spends 40 hours a week looking out for local kids and visiting sick folks in the hospital. We go into neighborhoods and ask, "Who is trusted here?" In one neighborhood it was the guy who collects the fees at the parking garage.

We're living with the excesses of 60 years of hyper individualism. There's a lot of emphasis in our culture on personal freedom, self-interest, self-expression, the idea that life is an individual journey toward personal fulfillment. You do you. But Weavers share an ethos that puts relationship over self. We are born into relationships, and the measure of our life is in the quality of our relationships. We precedes me.

Whether they live in red or blue America, they often use the same terms and embody the same values — deep hospitality, showing up for people and keep showing up. They are somewheres, not anywheres — firmly planted in their local community. I met one guy in Ohio who began his work by standing in the town square with a sign: "Defend Youngstown."

The phrase we heard most was "the whole person." Whether you are a teacher, a nurse or a neighbor, you have to see and touch the whole person — the **trauma**, the **insecurities** and the **dreams** as much as the **body** and the **brain**.

But the trait that leaps out above all others is "radical mutuality": We are all completely equal, regardless of where society ranks us. "I am broken; I need others to survive," an afterschool program leader in Houston told us. "**We don't do things for people. We don't do things to people. We do things with people,**" said a woman who builds community for teenagers in New Orleans.

Being around these people has been one of the most uplifting experiences of my life. Obviously, it's made me want to be more neighborly, to be more active and intentional in how I extend care.

But it has also changed my moral lens. I've become so impatient with the politicians I cover! They are so self-absorbed! Social scientists tell us that selfishness is natural, people are motivated by money, power and status. But Weavers are not motivated by

any of these things. They want to live in right relation with others and to serve the community good.

Their example has shown me that we don't just have a sociological problem; we have a moral problem. We all create a shared moral ecology through the daily decisions of our lives. When we stereotype, abuse, impugn motives and lie about each other, we've ripped the social fabric and encouraged more ugliness. When we **love across boundaries, listen patiently, see deeply and make someone feel known, we've woven it and reinforced generosity.** As Charles Péguy said, "The revolution is moral or not at all."

So the big question is: How do we take the success the Weavers are having on the local level and make it national? **The Weavers are building relationships one by one, which takes time.** Relationships do not scale.

But norms scale. If you can change the culture, you can change behavior on a large scale. If you can change the lens through which people see the world, as these Weavers have changed mine, then you can change the way people want to be in the world and act in the world. So that's our job. To shift the culture so that it emphasizes individualism less and relationalism more.

Culture changes when a small group of people, often on the margins of society, find a better way to live, and other people begin to copy them. These Weavers have found a better way to live. We at Weave — and all of us — need to **illuminate their example, synthesize their values** so we understand what it means to be a relationalist and not an individualist. **We need to create hubs where these decentralized networks can come together for solidarity and support.** We need to create a shared Weaver identity. In 1960, few people called themselves feminists. By 1980, millions did. Just creating that social identity and that sense of mutual purpose is an act of great power.

I guess my ask is that you declare your own personal declaration of interdependence and decide to become a Weaver instead of a ripper. This is partly about communication. Every time you assault and stereotype a person, you've ripped the social fabric. Every time you see that person deeply and make him or her feel known, you've woven it.

We also need to have faith in each other. Right now, millions of people all over are responding to the crisis we all feel. We in the news media focus on Donald Trump and don't cover them, but they are the most important social force in America right now. Renewal is building, relationship by relationship, community by community. It will spread and spread as the sparks fly upward.

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