

Community Conversation -

March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Mr. Roets

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The following takes place in a smoky, loud bar in some city. The bar is crowded, but we see our 5 authors each minding their own business.

We see HENRY DAVID THOREAU, an older gentleman, sitting in the corner of the bar wearing ragged, outdated clothes. He seems to be staring angrily at all of the maximalist scum indulging at this evil place.

We see ROBERT PUTNAM, an older-middle aged man standing at the bar. He is dressed like an academic, proudly donning a Harvard sweater. He proceeds to punch a man in the face who has asked him, for the fourth time that night, to repeat the phrase "I parked the car in Harvard Yard".

We see PETER SINGER, an older gentleman sitting with a homeless man at a booth. He is buying him a meal, almost as if it were an ethical responsibility to do so.

We see SCOTT BROWN, a middle aged gentleman, sitting at the bar breaking up with his long-time best friend. We can almost read his lips- "it's not you, it's me."

Finally, we see ELLEN GOODMAN, a middle aged woman who has brought her whole family to the bar. Her step-great-grandfather is passed out drunk in the corner while her third-cousin just got decked by ROBERT PUTNAM.

All looking for their own escape, PUTNAM, SINGER, BROWN, and GOODMAN go sit at the same table as THOREAU. They do not know it is him, but instead are somehow attracted to his scholarly presence. After some talking and introductions, they all realize that they are writers, and coincidentally, have specialties in the areas of community! Soon, THOREAU poses a question.

THOREAU: Well, I understand that all of you are invested in writing about our communities. I still, however, do not understand exactly what your viewpoints are. Therefore, I would like to pose a question that I have been pondering over the past few hours at this bar.

GOODMAN: GOOD idea!

THOREAU: After seeing all of these people wasting their lives on worthless relationships and drinks at this bar, I began to wonder- what are the characteristics of a productive and successful community at the start of the twenty-first century?

The whole table begins to whisper as they ponder their own respective answers. PUTNAM decides to answer the question first.

PUTNAM: As you know, my research interests lie in the combination of political science, sociology, and public health. Therefore, as I look for an answer to this question, my overarching answer is as follows. I believe that a successful community in the twenty-first century is healthy as well as socially connected.

BROWN: Well, duh.

PUTNAM: Yes, but it is much more than you think. People need to be healthy both mentally and physically to succeed. We are starting to take for granted our health and letting it slip. In fact, I have done extensive research on the effects of social connections on overall health. My team at Harvard has examined extensive data and has concluded that people that are more connected socially have lower rates of health problems.

PUTNAM pulls out a small notebook from his jacket

PUTNAM: I quote from my research- "We found a strong positive relationship between a comprehensive index of public health and the social capital index, along with a strong negative correlation between the SC and all-cause mortality rates."

PUTNAM: Overall, I believe that a future society needs to be interconnected socially in order to become healthy to succeed. We cannot forget the presence of others, otherwise we will fail.

THOREAU: Robert, I would like to see some actual data regarding this. I'm sure you can get that to me.

PUTNAM: Of course.

THOREAU: Simply because, as a minimalist, I believe that less of everything is better- even if it's social relationships. If you can focus on fewer relationships and activities, wouldn't this be better for your health? It would be a lot less stress.

PUTNAM: I do get where you are coming from, Henry David, and that's what I thought as well before this research, but the facts do not lie. We found real data that proves my point. However, we

did see a decline in happiness when an individual takes on many frequent activities, so you are partly right.

THOREAU: I see. I think now would be a good time to discuss my views. Like I said earlier, I take a very minimalistic approach to life in general. I believe that a successful community in the twenty-first century revolves around simplicity. Living in the woods of Massachusetts for some time, I have developed the skills of being self-reliant and simple. As I say in my book *Walden*, "I say let your affairs be two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand."

BROWN: Good point, Henry.

THOREAU: For example, I do not agree with the post office, or the modern day equivalent- social media. They are very similar and both very toxic. They are unnecessary and there aren't many important communications made through them. We should focus on ourselves instead, not invest strongly in the lives of others. Few relations are fine but many, phony relationships can take away from what is important in life.

BROWN: I agree with you Henry. With social media, we are beginning to amass very large amounts of friends. This is taking away from the true meaning of friendship and we are losing what means most.

THOREAU: Interesting, I would like to hear more about this later.

SINGER: Henry, I have read your works and I have noticed that you often discuss minimalism when it comes to possessions and activities as well.

THOREAU: Indeed, I believe that it is very important.

SINGER: Well if someone had the ability to obtain large amounts of wealth and possessions in order to give most to the poor, shouldn't they have the ethical responsibility do that? Instead of simply not doing anything.

THOREAU: That would be sufficient, I suppose, but I still believe it would be easier and better to simply not obtain the possessions in the first place.

BROWN: I would like to share my ideas next. I discussed social media earlier, and that's where my ideas mainly lie. Our current social media culture encourages the worst type of hoarding- the hoarding of friends. Besides making them worth less, it also

makes us harder to lose touch with them. You are always connected with them, even if you don't want to be.

THOREAU: Interesting.

BROWN: As I describe in my article, "Facebook Friendenomics", losing touch with friends is "nature's way of allowing you to change, adapt, and evolve". That's why my answer to the question would be that a successful community in the twenty-first century would rely less on social media and more on face to face communications. This way, we could naturally lose friends that we lose touch with, and deepen the ones we choose to. This would lead to better and stronger connections as well as a stronger community in general.

THOREAU: These are very intriguing ideas, and I agree. If social media were around in my time, I would very likely have the same ideas as you. Friends and relationships should be few and strong, not many and weak.

PUTNAM: I understand your ideas, but we still need relationships to promote overall public health.

BROWN: I am not saying we don't have ANY relationships, I am simply saying we need to strengthen the ones that do matter and rid the ones that don't. Which, under your ideas, would be better for public health.

PUTNAM: Ah, I see.

THOREAU: Ellen, you have been quiet for most of this discussion. Do you care to share your ideas?

GOODMAN: Certainty. I have slightly different ideas from you all. I believe that a successful community in the twenty-first century would mainly focus on extended, closer family structures that will begin to change the idea of what "family" is. To visualize it, I describe in my essay "The Family That Stretches (Together)" that "family trees are becoming family bushes". For example, you may live with your step-great-grandfather as well as your third cousin, and have strong relationships with both. Successful communities in the future will begin to develop more and stronger family relationships further strengthening the community.

THOREAU: You have interesting ideas but I cannot agree with you. Less is more for everything, even family relationships. I would prefer living with a smaller, if any, family. The bare necessities and relationships would make life better for me.

BROWN: I kind of agree with you, Ellen. In my piece I mostly discuss friend relationships, but family relationships are a whole different picture. I agree that evolving family structures would shape humanity for the better.

PUTNAM: I agree with you Ellen. Stronger and more family relationships can promote health in various ways. It may be a simple distribution of resources/abilities, reinforcing healthy norms, or even the fact that social capital can serve as a psychological triggering mechanism. I discussed all of these theories to explain my findings in my research.

GOODMAN: Interesting theories, I'll look into those.

SINGER: I would like to discuss my ideas now. My answer to the question is that a successful community in the twenty first century relies on extreme responsibility to the community through giving and philanthropy. I believe that an individual who has the capital and ability to give to the less fortunate has an ethical responsibility to do so. In my article, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty", I discuss a hypothetical scenario as follows.

SINGER proceeds to take a toy car, a small clay figure of a boy, and a toy train from his backpack. He illustrates the following scenario to the table with the figures as he tells it.

SINGER: You own a very nice car, a Bugatti, perhaps. Well, one day you park it near rail road tracks and go for a walk. Suddenly, you see a train coming on a different set of tracks. A small boy whom you've never met and is far away from you happens to be playing on those tracks and is in the path of the train. You have access to a switch that can send the train on the tracks away from the boy, but destroying your car. You decide to do nothing and allow the boy to die, saving your car.

SINGER dramatically destroys the clay figure of the boy with the train.

PUTNAM: That's terrible, I would never do anything like that.

GOODMAN: Me neither!

SINGER: Well, you're both lying, because unless you give a large amount of money to a world charity like UNICEF, you're doing it every day. Being privileged citizens in a country such as this, we have the ethical responsibility to give to the less fortunate. By not doing this, we are saying that a child's life is worth less than the luxuries that we enjoy every day. No different from

the hypothetical situation. The relatively miniscule amount of \$200 can help a child in a poverty-ridden country grow healthily from 2 to 6, their most dangerous years. Quoting from my article, "If we value the life of a child more than going to fancy restaurants, the next time we dine out we will know that we could have done something better with our money". Giving is a key trait to a successful community in the future. In an increasingly global environment, we need to make sure people in ALL areas of the world have the basic necessities they need to live.

THOREAU: I understand what you are saying, but shouldn't we focus on ourselves first? A child dying is definitely a bad thing, but what if YOU have barely enough food to begin with, do you still have the ethical responsibility?

SINGER: The ethical responsibility lies on those who have enough funds and resources to do so. So no, a poor person in our country does not have an ethical responsibility to give to the poor of other countries. However, if someone is poor by CHOICE, such as you, you should feel somewhat guilty. You have the ability to earn money and obtain resources to give to the poor- you are Harvard educated! You personally choose not to, though.

THOREAU: It is America, though. We all have freedom of choice.

SINGER: I guess you are true. But you should really try to give to the less fortunate.

PUTNAM: I apologize for the change of topics, but Ellen and I were talking and we strongly believe that we have the right answer regarding a future community. Many relationships are necessary for a strong future community. Between health and family structures, more relationships will propel a twenty-first century community into what it needs to be in this changing world.

ELLEN: More connections mean more opportunities to succeed. Even if these relationships aren't the strongest, we have opportunities to communicate and live together like never before. These relationships produce chances and resources that would otherwise pass us by.

BROWN: Thoreau and I would like to respectfully disagree. Fewer, though stronger, face to face relationships will promote growth and success in a community. Losing touch and strengthening friendships that matter has long been an integral part of our social lives, and we are beginning to lose that.

THOREAU: We need to focus on the things and relationships that actually matter, not the ones that don't. Stronger and fewer relationships are key to a successful society.

SINGER: I do not agree with either of your alliances. Relationships aren't everything in a successful society. What about the people that are so malnourished they cannot even have relationships? We cannot look forward to a twenty-first century society without examining and realizing our ethical responsibility to give to the less fortunate.

GOODMAN: Good point, Peter.

BROWN: I guess that is true.

THOREAU: I just got an idea. This does not sound like me at all, and it pains me that to not be simple in this case, but I believe that the answer to this question may be a mix of everything we have discussed here tonight.

SINGER: That makes sense, yes.

The entire table talks in agreement.

PUTNAM: We cannot expect to find the answer to this question in any one person's work or research. A successful society in the twenty first century will be a mix of both the individual and the community.

BROWN: Having many relationships, but still strong ones you can depend on isn't a bad thing.

SINGER: When also intertwined with philanthropic giving, our combination of ideas shines.

GOODMAN: We cannot forget the many other factors that play a role in a successful community, however. We only talked about relationships and giving today, but there are so many more factors that are necessary and we cannot come to a conclusion with any sole factor.

THOREAU: I agree, Ellen. Thank you for discussing this pressing question with me; it has been a great time.

Thus a conclusion is reached, and our 5 authors prepare to leave. They all thank Thoreau and each other, as they exchange phone numbers, emails, and scholarly documents. They all then leave the bar content with their conclusion.