Scrolling Alone

Abby M. Foreman

Dordt College, abby.foreman@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/942

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
Scrolling Alone

Abstract
"We should ask ourselves how we can create community that is hospitable and encourages positive connections with one another."

Posting about the problem of social isolation from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation.

https://inallthings.org/scrolling-alone/

Keywords
In All Things, social interaction, loneliness, social isolation, volunteerism

Disciplines
Christianity

Comments
In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

This blog post is available at Digital Collections @ Dordt: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/942
How can we work to stem the rising tide of loneliness and alienation?

In a recent opinion piece, *NY Times* columnist David Brooks claimed, “More and more Americans are socially poor.” Social isolation has long been linked to poor health and social outcomes and as is most often always the case, these problems are exacerbated by economic and social inequality. Among the tidal wave of the current bad news, we also read that depression and suicide rates are increasing among all income groups. People report feeling lonelier at work and in their everyday lives. Substance abuse and other forms of self-medication are also on the rise. Brooks makes connections between this social isolation, internet usage, and the decline of neighborhoods when he writes, “…heavy internet users are much less likely to have contact with their proximate neighbors to exchanges favors and extend care. There’s something big happening to the social structure of neighborhoods…The middle ring cross-class associations of town and neighborhood have fallen apart.”

Two decades ago, sociologist Robert Putnam made a splash with his claim in the book *Bowling Alone* that America’s civil associations were declining. Americans are no longer participating in social activities like bowling leagues. Social capital is declining and social isolation is increasing. The concept of social capital has both private and public elements—individuals connect to one another in ways that provide benefits and connections. Publicly, these associations generate community expectations of mutual obligation, cooperation, and reciprocity. Social capital has bonding (inclusive) and bridging (exclusive) functions (Putnam 20-23). Like with all things, social capital can be used responsibly or it can be misused. When it works well, however, it increases the sense of belonging and community.

In his more recent book, *Our Kids*, Putnam explores how inequality has become entrenched in communities through structural and social means in ways that are especially damaging to the upward mobility and well-being of kids from low-income families and communities. Parents with higher levels of education and income continue to pour increasing resources into their
children for lessons, educational opportunities and athletic programs that require significant
time and financial investment. This increases the opportunity gap among children and depletes
resources for public programs with the same intent at lower costs. Putnam is really speaking
to what Brooks also bemoaned—a notable loss of cross-class associations in neighborhoods and
cities. The “haves” and “have-nots” have become increasingly isolated from one another. Add
the political, racial, and social tensions that are exacerbated by social media, and we can easily
despair. Online life, at its best, should support life and facilitate connections, but it will never
replace the need for healthy and hospitable communities in the places that we live. In its worst
manifestations, online life has increased our isolation, our social and political divisions, and has
contributed to increases in anxiety and depression.

This month’s issue of Comment magazine is a must-read. The issue, devoted to the problem of
social isolation, includes a number of excellent articles including an editorial titled “Not Meant
to be Alone” by James K.A. Smith where he pinpoints one of the most basic human desires as
“hungering for some sign that you are known.” We are created as social beings; we are made
to be known by others. In the garden, God declared that is was not good for Adam to be alone.
The Israelites structured a community in which they cared for the vulnerable in their midst
through practices like gleaning and debt relief. In the New Testament we see the community
shared between the disciples and Jesus as well as the early church in Acts. Even in light of this
biblical guidance, it can be difficult to know how to faithfully respond to the reality of today’s
increase in social isolation.

If you are lonely or you want to reach out to those who are lonely, what can be done? We can,
of course, reach out and befriend someone. This is a good thing to do, I would highly
recommend doing it. We are wired, I think, to think first of this micro-level response. I see a
need, so I fill it by reaching out to a person in need. I practice hospitality at the individual level.
However, the problem as presented by Brooks and Putnam is not just interpersonal—it is
structural, organizational, and societal. To respond to this question at the macro level is to
believe that creating hospitable and just community structures, organizations, and spaces will
lead to greater flourishing for individuals and families. Looking at the problem in this way is to
embrace “a rising tide floats all boats” perspective; it is to understand the problem of individual
loneliness together. We should ask ourselves how we can create community that is hospitable
and encourages positive connections with one another.

In Isaiah 58 and the book of James, we learn that God is not interested in religious practices
divorced from living just and compassionate lives in service to one another. If we truly embrace
this, then we should be careful as parents, for example, to consider what benefits not only my
child but also the children in my community. How might our churches provide programs that
benefit more than just the members of the church? Let’s attend community festivals and
parades, volunteer to coach kids’ teams, support our parks and libraries, and be active, positive
members within our churches, neighborhoods, and communities. Being active in these various
spaces may sometimes seem like tedious, thankless maintenance work (serving in nursery or
picking up trash, for example), but submit yourself to the greater good. God commands us to
faithfully serve, but He does not promise that each act will yield meaningful, life-changing
experiences for us. In our world of immediate gratification, we have too easily embraced this view in our service to others. Instead, just serve because you should. Commit yourself to a long walk in the same direction. Isaiah 58 is powerful in the way that it urges us to be more mindful of the common good, to be generous, to work for just living conditions for all and in doing so “You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again” (The Message, Isaiah 58:9-12 ). These descriptive labels—fixers, restorers, rebuilders, renovators—provide a clear image of the work that we should be committed to in our communities.

FOOTNOTES

2. Ibid.
5. https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/not-meant-to-be-alone/
6. Ibid.