

Calvin's Constructed Community

Calvin and Hobbes are sledding.

Calvin: Miss Wormwood assigned civics homework. We're supposed to define the importance of "community" in America. You're always blabbering on about this. Will you help me?

Hobbes: Sure! In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah discusses the decline in civic, volunteer, and religious institutions and how this weakens communities.

Calvin: But why do we need "community"?

Hobbes: Community provides care, connection, and a sense of belonging. Humans are [hardwired for connection](#). [Evolutionarily](#), being separated from your tribe meant death. That's why [isolation](#) and [loneliness](#) create [deep, existential pain](#). [Communities](#) know they're stronger together than as individuals alone.

Calvin: Phooey! Look at me! I'm a self-made man. 100% self-reliant. Now help me with the sled.

Hobbes: Oh, sweet irony. Communities also give people a sense of purpose, a higher calling, or a shared belief system. Churches are a prime example of this.

Calvin: Why go to church? God is all around us -- in the snowcapped mountains, the evergreen trees, the cool wind in our faces. If this isn't where God lives, then where does he?

Hobbes: You can define God or spirituality however you want, Deist, but plenty of people need a church as a place of worship and belonging. However, the US is becoming [less religious](#), and many now see religion as a personal reflection. Bellah saw this pivot as an erosion of societal mores, and individualism was partly to blame.

Calvin: What's wrong with individualism?

Hobbes: Bellah didn't think we should reject individualism altogether; we should redirect it to serve the common good. He believed our interdependence was not only crucial for survival but also essential for fulfillment, stating, "It's only in relation to society that an individual can fulfill himself" (Min. 8:51).

Bellah distinguished between utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism is associated with self-interest, achievement, and economic pursuits. Expressive individualism is concerned with personal authenticity and "finding oneself." Both types of individualism detach people from their biblical and civic duties. But

for Bellah, expressive individualism was more worrisome because it discouraged obligations and shared responsibility to community, family, and institutions.

Calvin: Shared responsibility? I'm going to be a billionaire. I'll share nothing. Through [cultural hegemony](#), I'll shape society into whatever I want, then look down on the plebeians in a fit of laughter.

Hobbes: Well, that's one way to get the people on your side. There's a correlation between [hyper-individualism](#) and greater [wealth inequality](#). Greater wealth inequality strains [social infrastructure](#) and [weakens communities](#). Crime, [violence](#), and poverty rates go up. You don't want the philistines fomenting a revolution against you, do you?

Calvin: Pfft. I'll just hire security. But don't you lose your identity and sense of self in a community?

Hobbes: No. In fact, a plurality of ideas and opinions strengthens communities. For example, take my group, SASS – Stuffed Animal Support System. In our Zoom meetings, we bond over similar yet different experiences, like coping with insufferable owners.

Calvin: This is what you do while I'm at school? It sounds totally superfluous and like a waste of taxpayer dollars.

Hobbes: It's not taxpayer-funded. It's a support group, a community of like-minded "Stuffies." We have shared values, goals, and a purpose. There's solidarity and kinship in knowing others are going through the same thing. And by the way, I'll be gone the last weekend of April. It's the Stuffle convention, and I'm the keynote speaker. My talk is—

Calvin: What?!?! You're leaving me alone?!?!

Hobbes: Your parents will be here.

Calvin: That's even worse!! [wailing] What if they leave me with [gasps] Roslyn!!! The last time she babysat, she waterboarded me!!

Hobbes: She made you take a bath! Five minutes ago, you were extolling the virtues of self-reliance and individualism, and the second I say I'm leaving for three days—

Calvin: Three days?!?! In three days, I'll become a heroin addict, overdose, and die! And you'll be responsible for my death of despair!

Hobbes: [murmurs] I should be so lucky. [Deaths of despair](#), coined by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, are deaths caused primarily by suicide, drug overdoses, or alcohol-related diseases affecting mostly white, middle-aged people ravaged by economic insecurity, not ornery six-year-olds. The breakdown of communities is a contributing factor. Ride through

the Rust Belt thirty years after NAFTA and see the destruction that neoliberal nightmare wrought.

These sacrificial zones reify Marx's warning about alienation. We're not only alienated from the product of our work now, but from work itself, and reduced to nameless "[meat puppets](#)." Alienation lays the foundation for Emile Durkheim's [anomie](#) -- a "normless" state where society's standards and values break down or become unclear, often resulting in disconnection and isolation.

I think we're in [anomie](#) now. And it's fueling what Roger Lancaster calls "[poisoned solidarity](#)," the intoxication forged from the negative energies of fear, envy, hatred, and a lust for violence.

Calvin: Golly, Judas, your lugubrious Tinder profile writes itself. So what's the solution? What do I tell Miss Wormwood?

Hobbes: You, Calvin, should cultivate more social capital. Social capital is a network of people -- like neighbors, coworkers, and friends -- engaging in reciprocity, cooperation, or goodwill. You could volunteer for, say, a tiger rescue, or, ask other kids to join your GROSS (Get Rid Of Slimy girls) club. You could do a nice thing for a neighbor or, perhaps, even a girl, like Susie.

Calvin: I'd rather rip my eyeball out and throw it at her!

Hobbes: Forty years ago, Robert Bellah worried about where we were heading. Today, technology is hurtling us toward silos of brokenness. We're increasingly [disconnected](#) in an overly [connected](#) world. The North Star of the American community is dead. Now, the cult of the self, showcased in the \$6.8 trillion/year [wellness industry](#), is center stage. And yet, you can't ask the beleaguered single parent who works 60 hrs./week on 5 hrs. of sleep to join the PTA.

Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci once said, "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters." So, keep the monsters under your bed and find community wherever you can. Engage in what Kristen Ghodsee calls "[reciprocal flow](#)," a natural cycle of giving and receiving. And, maybe, eventually, together, we'll find a new North Star.

Calvin: Hobbes, ol' buddy, promise me you'll never leave me. You're the best friend an incredibly handsome, mildly solipsistic child prodigy can have.

Hobbes: I wouldn't dream of it, Calvin. I wouldn't dream of it.

Works Cited:

Bellah, Robert N., et al. Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Audiobook, Blackstone Audio, 2019.

Institute for Social Capital. <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/explanation-types-social-capital/>