

THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE COMMUNITY

by Dr. Marilyn Sewell

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OPENING WORDS

"Every heart is the other heart. Every soul is the other soul. Every face is the other face. The individual is the one illusion."

-Marguerite Young *Miss Macjntosh, MyDading*

One of the finest essayists writing in the English language today, in my opinion, is Joan Didion. She and I have something in common~an infatuation with John Wayne. Not the real flesh and blood Wayne, who wore suits and ties and hated horses, but the icon. The Man. The following words are from her essay "John Wayne: a Love Song": "[It was the summer of 1943 and I was eight years old when] I first saw John Wayne. Saw the walk, heard the voice. Heard him tell the girl in a picture called *War of the wildcats* that he would build her a house, 'at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow.' Deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls, that is still the line I wait to hear. I tell you this... simply to demonstrate that when John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams.

In John Wayne's world, John Wayne was supposed to give the orders. 'Let's ride,' he said, and 'Saddle up.' 'Forward *ho*,' and 'a man's gotta do what he's got to do.' 'Hello, there,' he said when he first saw the girl. . . just standing around on the front porch waiting for somebody to ride through the tall grass. When John Wayne spoke, there was no mistaking his intentions; he had a sexual authority so strong that even a child could perceive it. And in a world we understood early to be characterized by venality and doubt and paralyzing ambiguities, he suggested another world, one which may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more: a place where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it; a world in which, if a man did what he had to do, he could one day take the girl and go riding through the draw and find himself there at the bend in the bright river, the cottonwoods shimmering in the early morning sun."

Forget truth or character or historical accuracy or morality-it was the way he moved his body, it was his voice: no wasted motion, no frivolous words. He was the epitome of rugged individualism, a chosen life, not an imposed one, the way many of our lives feel today. It's hard to Imagine the Duke saying to the other soldiers or the cowboys in the movie, "What do you guys think we ought to do?" No, it would be "Saddle up." And the guys would.

The emphasis on the individual is strongly rooted in American culture. Perhaps it arrived early on in the genes of those strong persons who cared enough about their own desires and longings to leave their country and sail to a New World, to sail into unknown dangers, risking everything to do it their way. An 18th century traveller in our country, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, admired our individualism, but warned even then about the dangers of that quality not being balanced by a concern for the whole. "People living in an aristocratic age," he wrote are almost always closely involved with something outside themselves, and they are often inclined to forget about themselves. Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain [People] form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. . . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." Not that any of us would like to bring aristocracy back, but his point is well taken about the cult of individualism he saw emerging in early America.

If our beginnings, then, lie in a kind of practical philosophy that says the good life goes to the strong, the one who steps out boldly and makes claims and takes what he wants, then how is that view of the world elaborated upon in contemporary America? Though the nuclear threat is much diminished compared to the days when we were digging bomb shelters in our back yards, we now know somewhere deep in our collective psyche that the existence of our world is threatened both by nuclear weapons and by abuse of the natural world. When we can't breathe our air and drink our water,

we're in trouble. Any four-legged creature knows this. Not just our way of life could go-life itself could go. This understanding discourages long-term thinking. Moreover, a large underclass live in such perpetual violence as to have little sense of a personal future. Security is in fact a little on the boring side. Living with death, we play with life. We become cynical and despairing. The moment, after all, is all we have. If the fabric of the culture is so frayed and vulnerable anyway, why bother to sew it up? I just need to get mine. Something for me. And the common good is lost.

But another cry is beginning to be heard. At this point in history, we hear voices longing for an existence bigger than me and mine. It is a cry I hear at this church. "How can we develop a sense of community? This church is so large!" The truth is that community doesn't have to do with size. It has to do with common values, and it has to do with intentionality. It has to do with a sense of the past and events and memories that are shared over time. Yes, the dead are a part of the community:

they are a great cloud of witnesses who bring their lessons from the past and call us forward to the demands of our day. To become a part of this church community, to really be here, requires hearing the stories from our noble history, honoring our ancestors, and planning for a common future that we wish to give to our children and our grandchildren and to the larger city of Portland.

The question again: how does one come into community? Community is something we actively enter into, not something we passively wait to happen to us. I see some people join this church, and they immediately start ushering or singing in the choir or join one of the social justice task forces. They join not just in a formal sense with a signature and a financial pledge, but they begin investing themselves in the community. These new members will become part of something larger than themselves, and that feels good. Chances are, they will be around for a long time. And they will receive more than they give.

Today churches are often seen as just one more yuppie consumer item. Where can I get the best value-the most church for the least investment? Where is the best show? The Unitarians do pretty well: no rules, no original sin, and they don't expect as much in the plate as the Presbyterians-let's go there!

Community does not come out of this consumer mentality. Community comes when we bring presence and authenticity to a group we join. When the tears ease out during "Spirit of Life," and you glance over and see someone else tearing up, too. When the children come forward for a story, and though your children are grown, you feel the love and care for these little ones flowing from your own heart. When you're in an adult education class, and you share not only your strengths, but your terrible failings and weaknesses, and you feel accepted just as you are. when you join our Habitat for Humanity project and make it possible for a struggling young mother to have shelter for herself and her child.

In order to create community, you have to empty yourself. You have to create space to let the new enter. Let me tell you a story. Two monks, Busho and Tanko, were traveling from one monastery to another on a rainy day. Halfway in their journey they came to a crossroad that had become a gigantic mud puddle. A young woman in a lovely kimono was standing there looking forlorn. Busho went up to her and asked if she needed help getting across the road. She said she did. "Well, then," Busho exclaimed, "jump up on my back." She did, and Busho waded across the road and gently put her down. Then he and Tanko continued their journey through the mud and rain. They arrived at their destination just before nightfall, tired and hungry. They washed and then were fed a good meal by the other monks. After dinner Tanko said, "Busho, how could you? How could you have carried that woman? You know that we monks are not supposed to have anything to do with women. Yet you invited one to actually jump up on you, and not only that, she was young and beautiful. You have disgraced your vows and our order. How could you?" Busho looked at him. "Tanko, are you still carrying that young woman?" he asked. "Why, I, put her down over five hours ago."

Whether you are an old or a new member, if you want to experience community, you can't come with your agenda that you impose on others. Come with a heart that stands open, with a willingness to receive, with the propensity to hear. People are attracted to this community, or to any community, because of the way they see people being treated. Are people relating to one another with respect and dignity? When someone is in pain, is that pain acknowledged? Is there a general air of optimism and good will and celebration? People ask me all the time-why has your church grown so fast? Do

you have any kind of growth plan? No, we have no such plan. There are lots of reasons we've grown, I say, but the short answer is "the erotic energy." And I mean by that there is life and joy and celebration here. People have a good time here, and they care about one another, and they care about their city and their state.

Let's go back to individualism now for a moment. The kind of egotistical, take-no-prisoners aggression that is characteristic of so much of our society is deadening to both the individual spirit and to the larger needs of the civic body. But the honoring of the individual is something we want to preserve—as in the right of an individual to speak his truth, to practice her faith. These are cherished rights within our democracy and certainly within Unitarian Universalism. After all, our first principle is "We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person." And individuals need to develop their talents and capacities, to mature, to evolve as fully as possible.

It's just that the process doesn't end there. As Rudolf Steiner says, "The rose adorns herself in order to adorn the garden." Without that perspective, there is in fact no real fulfillment for the individual, as I see it. The garden, the context of our lives. For it is only in giving ourselves away that we become who we are. It's not, "Look at how gifted I am!" It's waking up each day full of thanksgiving and saying to the universe, "Where shall I bestow my sacred gifts today? Lead me to my calling, once more, during this new and precious day, during this time I have been given."

Our church community is being called forward now by some simple facts of history and circumstance. You'll hear more about that in the annual meeting that will follow this service. It is my prayer that the formidable task before us will draw us together as never before and bond us as a community. I believe it will, because I know what kind of people you are. I was talking to one of our church leaders the other day saying, "Well, we need to have more ways of developing intimacy in this big church." He stopped me dead in my tracks with his response. He said, "I'm not here for intimacy. I'm here to do a great work."

And how do we do that great work? We do it together. I for one am not going to get on my horse and lead you to some mythical cottonwood trees. That's not how it works here, cowpoke buddies. We do this together. In the real world. Where real people are hurting and laughing and working and making love and dying. Because we have hope that is drawing us forward to a great work. And we have love that will sustain us all along the way. So be it.

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol.2, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969), pp.506-8.

PRAYER

0 Creator God, we too are called to create, to be reborn each day into new challenges and callings. We are individuals with different inclinations, different ways of seeing the world. But we are also a community of the faithful. Make us faithful to your purposes in this world, and show us how to work together for the greater good. Be in our midst every step of the way, that we might be blessed and we in turn might bless the world.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

May we as a community trust in the Spirit of Life that leads us forward.