The Reading Connection

By Jordan Fabish

Do You Want to be a Millionaire?

“I don’t have a social life.”

“There is no free time.”

“My whole life is juggling.”

“I’m always behind. I never catch up.”


Were you surprised to see that Levine and Cureton had been taking notes on your inner thoughts? You will, no doubt, be even more surprised to know that the weary sources of these quotes are students-college students not teachers, yet such is the tenor of many conversations I overhear or have with teachers. And, of course, there is considerable evidence of tired, over-scheduled, 2001 children, as well. The discouraging issue is not whose load is lighter or heavier, but that we are all in the same boat, yet feeling too drained to absorb the companionship of our fellow-sailors. The turn of the century has been characterized in many ways, one of which is by a trend toward individualism that is so strong as to amount to social isolation. In their book, When Hope and Fear Collide (reviewed by JoAnn Carter-Wells in the Winter ’99/Spring ’00 issue of the HDCS newsletter), Levine and Cureton, in fact, metaphorically represent social isolation as a skiff in a storm:

The boat is taking on water and believed to be in imminent danger of sinking. Under these circumstances, there is but one alternative…(to) single-mindedly bail. Conditions are so bad that no one has time to care for others who may also be foundering. No distractions are permitted. The pressure is enormous and unremitting (p. 96).

Does the desperate fatigue of students and teachers extend to the rest of the population? The armchair social scientist (reading teachers have diverse interests!) can find a fascinating investigation of America’s social (non)involvement and its consequences in a recent book by Robert D. Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, called Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community (Simon & Schuster, 2000). Putnam’s substantial, statistically supported, and very readable work suggests that 21st-century American communities have become socially bankrupt: where we used to bowl in leagues and attend club or civic meetings, we are, instead, experiencing the shrinking “social capital” of social-bond disconnectedness. We are “bowling alone.”

Well, so what? There are plenty of benefits to individualism and plenty of drawbacks to groups, to joiners of groups. Putnam’s thorough consideration of the trend toward social isolation acknowledges the “dark side” of groups from Babbitt to Pleasantville, identifying the “doltish, narrow-mindish, materialistic, snobbish, glad-handing, bigoted, middle-class joiner (who) is a stock figure in American letters” (p. 351)-everything we don’t want to be.
That said, his primary position is that our diminishing social capital is hurting us: "Of all the domains in which I have traced the consequences of social capital, in none is the importance of social connectedness so well established as in the case of health and well-being" (p. 326). People with strong social ties apparently have strong immune systems, too—they get fewer colds and are less likely to impair their health by smoking, over-eating, over drinking, and the like; they are less likely to die of heart disease, circulatory problems, cancer (in women), and suicide. Yes, depression and suicide have increased as social connectedness has decreased. In sum, social capital makes us happy, and happiness makes us healthy!

If our diminishing social currency is indeed a problem, can we identify and correct the cause? Surely it is our similarly diminishing free time that limits our civic ties. Perhaps, yet Putnam put busyness and time pressure, "everybody’s favorite explanation for social disengagement" low on the list of causes (p. 187). Actually, busy people are more inclined to volunteer, see friends, have a religious-social connection, attend club meetings. The metamorphosis of the stay-at-home mom/club-woman of the fifties to the work-outside-the-home mom of today "played a visible but quite modest role in the erosion of social capital and civic engagement," according to Putnam (p. 202). Statistically, as many people who do not feel rushed have disengaged as people who do. As many men have disengaged as women, as many single as married, as many wealthy as poor (p. 192, 203).

OK, if it’s not primarily lack of free time, then it must be THE NET. People are sitting around playing computer games and surfing the Internet instead of going to Boy Scouts, the Elks meeting, or to visit neighbors. Yes, that is probably so, but the jury is still out on whether the Internet has caused social disconnect. From Silicon Snake Oil (Clifford Stoll) to The Gutenberg Elegies (Sven Birkerts), writers and philosophers warn of technology’s distorting some of our deepest human values and connections. Yet the introduction of the telephone provoked the same auguries, and 125 years of its use has led to stronger, not weaker human communication. The same may hold true of the Internet, particularly since its market penetration has been ten times quicker than for the telephone, since one can even make new friends on line (but not by phone), and because “virtual” social capital has already been firmly established via on-line interest groups and e-mail. The internet is one phenomenon where social currency is burgeoning. Well, just in case you thought our social capital had not hit the skids after all, but only transformed into a healthy dot com, Putnam poses four challenges to that notion: (1) “Cyberapartheid” happens through lack of access; (2) the nuances present in face-to-face communication—vocal timbre, speed, rhythm, inflection; body distance, carriage, and gesture; facial subtleties—are absent in current computer-mediated exchange, and are unlikely to be common (or comin’) soon; (3) interest groups are so narrowly specialized as to be more exclusive than inclusive; and (4) this question: “Will the Internet in practice turn out to be a niftier telephone or a niftier television? In other words, will the Internet become predominantly a means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment” (p. 176)?

As you ponder your prediction, mix in Levine and Cureton’s assessment that societies cyclically turn from periods of community ascendancy to periods of individual ascendancy, from activism to rest, from self-denial for good of the group to concern for individual freedoms and rights, typically matched with national crisis and post-crisis, respectively (p. 146).

Whatever the reason for our loneliness (and Putnam inspects several more), there is an entity other than the Net that, in contrast to the mainstream, has shown social capital growth: the small group. Support groups, book discussions, Sunday school classes, and hobby clubs have strengthened their numbers and their social import. Personal investment of time and self in these small groups is making people rich in the social currency they need to stay healthy and content. Doesn’t it make sense, then, to attend every Reading Educators Guild activity that you can?

Yes, just count this essay as an elaborate invitation to attend the R.E.G. Winter Dinner, February 21, 2001. Our beloved Norma Inabinette, recently retired, will be the speaker, and you can renew the valuable associations you made in CSUF’s reading program with instructors you admired and fellow-graduate students who cared about what you care about. Let’s quit bailing for an hour or so and soak
up some professional companionship.

Build your social currency—come to the R.E.G. Winter Dinner!

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**Faculty Footnotes**

By Kathi Bartle Angus

The unprecedented growth experienced by the Reading Program has led to a number of events. We have been able to hire two new full-time, tenure track faculty members and are in the process of searching for more, and we have been able to develop more opportunities for community involvement.

Dr. Patrick Manyak and Dr. Rosario Jasis are our new faculty. Patrick divides his time between Elementary Education and Reading. He is currently teaching Linguistics and Reading course for our East Whittier cohort. Patrick recently completed his graduate work at USC and has traveled extensively to exotic destinations. Rosario will begin teaching with us in the fall after she completes her dissertation at UC Berkeley. She will be primarily responsible for our multiple sections of Cross Cultural Approaches in Reading courses. We are pleased to have these two outstanding individuals join us.

The expansion of our community involvement is in two main areas. Our Newport-Mesa cohort will be piloting an off-campus clinic this semester under the direction of JoAnne Greenbaum. The 35 clinicians will be working on location at Tewinkle Middle School with students from Tewinkle and California Elementary School. In addition, two of our Testing and Evaluation of Reading Performance classes will be working on site with students from Anaheim Elementary School District and Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District. Students chosen to participate in the after school programs will be matched with graduate students who will administer diagnostic tests. The students will then receive tutoring based on the needs assessment outlined in their case study. Needless to say, the administrators of the schools involved are delighted with the opportunity. Cristina Sanchez (Anaheim) and Mary Hansen (Placentia-Yorba Linda) are the instructors for these exciting new sections of Read 516.

Indeed, this is an exciting time to be involved in reading education.

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If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, by being a regular column writer or just an occasional article donor, please contact Jan Bagwell at jbagwell@fullerton.edu. We need all of you to help make REG great!