

## **Politics Is Destroying Civil Society—But Gratitude Can Save Us**

**The seeds of civil society are sown through the practice of gratitude.**

by Barry Brownstein

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Civil society seems to be waning. People are losing respect for the conditions that allow human beings to flourish, warns Jonah Goldberg in his book *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy.*

Goldberg, a columnist for the *National Review*, defines civil society as “that vast social ecosystem—family, schools, churches, associations, sports, business, local communities, etc.—that mediates life between the state and the individual.” Goldberg adds, “It is a healthy civil society, not the state, that civilizes people.”

As more Americans place politics at the core of their identity, civil society erodes. Is authoritarianism the inevitable result of a quest to find meaning through politics?

Political partisanship is at the forefront of the consciousness of Americans, according to research by political science professors Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood. Westwood, a professor at Dartmouth, told *The New York Times*, “Partisanship, for a long period of time, wasn’t viewed as part of who we are. It wasn’t core to our identity. It was just an ancillary trait. But in the modern era, we view party identity as something akin to gender, ethnicity or race—the core traits that we use to describe ourselves to others.”

Amanda Taub summed up the findings of Iyengar and Westwood this way: “Today, political parties are no longer just the people who are supposed to govern the way you want. They are a team to support, and a tribe to feel a part of.” When a political party is your tribe, Goldberg observes, “Citizens in California and New York become invested in partisan fights in North Carolina or Indiana as if they were skirmishes in a larger war.”

Social media magnifies tribalism. As Goldberg points out:

This tribal us-versus-them worldview is intensified on social media, where it is easier to find like-minded but virtual "friends" a thousand miles away than it is to have a conversation with your actual neighbour.

Yet, as Goldberg reminds us, "Family, friendship, religion, civil society—these are the only vessels of meaning compatible with a free society. Any god born out of the state will inevitably be a false one."

One remedy for our eroding civil society is right at our fingertips. To avail ourselves of this remedy takes less effort than cooking your dinner tonight. A mindset shift is that remedy.

In his book *Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, psychology professor Robert Emmons points out that gratitude "binds people together in relationships of reciprocity" and thus is "one of the building blocks of a civil and humane society."

Practicing gratitude has other benefits. Emmons' research shows that "grateful people experience higher levels of joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness and optimism, and that the practice of gratitude as a discipline protects a person from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed and bitterness."

Webster's Dictionary defines "ingratitude" as: "forgetfulness of, or poor return for, kindness received." "Ingratitude," Emmons observes, "leads inevitably to a confining, restricting and 'shrinking' sense of self. Emotions such as anger, resentment, envy and bitterness tend to undermine social relations."

How often do we take for granted and thus forget the benefits of modern life?

In 2017, a storm knocked out power to many communities in New Hampshire for almost a week. Propane for running generators and furnaces was in high demand, and the Department of Transportation waived the safety rules for the maximum shift of delivery drivers. Speaking with the driver who delivered propane to our house, I learned of the long

hours he was working to keep customers in fuel. The driver sheepishly added, “You don’t need to know my problems.” I encouraged him to continue. As he told of his challenges, he related that a friend, an electric lineman crew chief, was sleeping in two-hour shifts before returning to the field. As he gave me a glimpse into the human realities of emergency response, I felt regret for my ingratitude. I had been preoccupied with griping thoughts about how long our power and access to the Internet had been out.

Those drivers and repairman were both Democrats and Republicans. No one was inquiring to which political tribe they belonged.

Emmons writes, “Gratefulness is the knowing awareness that we are the recipients of goodness. In gratitude we remember the contributions that others have made for the sake of our well-being.” During this outage was I not an ingrate, unaware of the goodness all around me?

In a *Simpson’s* episode, Bart Simpson offers grace over dinner: “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”

On the most superficial level, Bart is correct. If the Simpsons exchanged \$100 of household income for food at the supermarket, both the Simpsons and the supermarket were made better off in the transaction. Win-win transactions are the cornerstone of a free market.

Look deeper. Why, in modern America, is food so inexpensive and bountiful in comparison to North Korea or Venezuela? Why does a cornucopia spread out before us today that could not have been imagined anywhere on the planet just a few centuries ago?

We had nothing to do with the generations of enterprising individuals who came before us, accumulated capital, and put it to use. We had nothing to do with the sacrifices of America’s founders who bequeathed to us a Constitution based on the revolutionary idea that our rights are unalienable and not granted to us by government.

Bart Simpson is an ingrate. Are we?

In a commencement address at Ithaca College a number of years ago, the well-known actor and economist Ben Stein pointed out the uniqueness of our age.

“Freedom, prosperity, abundance, opportunity are things that mankind has been fighting for all eternity, and we don't even think about them every day. Life should be very largely about gratitude,” Stein said. “We are all heirs and heiresses to a society of freedom and plenty that most of us did absolutely nothing to earn.”

By grace, “we are the recipients of help from others, both past and present,” Emmons reminds us. “If you believe in grace, you believe that there is a pattern of beneficence in the world that exists quite independently of your own striving and even your own existence.”

Grace is unearned. Do we not receive grace every day?

When we experience gratitude, we experience increased levels of well-being. In his *Scientific American* study, “Which Character Strengths Are Most Predictive of Well-Being?” psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman concluded that “the best predictor of well-being was gratitude.” Of 24 character strengths, “the only significant independent positive predictors of well-being were gratitude and love of learning.”

If gratitude and love of learning are in short supply in our lives, should we be surprised when our well-being erodes?

Goldberg calls the astonishing progress of the past few centuries *the Miracle*. For many, there is no longer gratitude for the Miracle. Nor is there a “love of learning” for the conditions that made the Miracle possible. Goldberg argues, “Our problems today can be traced to the fact that we no longer have gratitude for the Miracle and for the institutions and customs that made it possible.”

Where there is no gratitude, grievances arise. Goldberg writes, “Where there is no gratitude—and the effort that gratitude demands—all manner of resentments and hostilities flood back in.”

Notice how often the language of politicians focuses on lack and grievances. When good fortune is mentioned, it is accompanied by complaints of unfair advantages. Emmons puts it this way: “Less grateful people are preoccupied with burdens, curses, deprivations, and complaints. The language of gratitude draws our attention to the positive contributions that others have made to our lives.”

Should it surprise us that when grievances replace gratitude, tribalism replaces respect for individual rights? Goldberg writes:

“The Miracle ushered in a philosophy that says each person is to be judged and respected on account of their own merits, not the class or caste of their ancestors. Identity politics says each group is an immutable category, a permanent tribe.”

Gratitude can be cultivated through education and awareness. Businessman Yoshimoto Ishin developed Naikan, a Japanese practice of self-reflection. Naikan means “inside observation.” The reflective practice of Naikan is facilitated by considering three questions: “1. What have I received from others? 2. What have I given to others? 3. What troubles and difficulties have I caused others?”

Let’s pause for a moment and reflect: The Miracle of modern life means we have all received far more than we will ever repay. The bounty we enjoy does not flow from politicians. We are indebted to the legions of men and women, living and dead, from all over the world, who made possible the Miracle of the market. With that awareness, our mindset shifts, gratitude swells, and the seeds of civil society are sown.