Why Are We Lonely?

Ironically, isolation is something many Americans have in common. Why do we feel so alone? Tocqueville has answers.

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WHY DO ALL MY FRIENDS live in different states? Why have I lived in four cities in the last six years? Why have I moved right at the moment when I have made new friends and begun to feel at home? Why did I see my grandparents only a few times per year as a child? Why is my extended family spread out across the United States? Why are these questions relevant to every person that I know? Why are they most true for the most successful members of society, who get fancy degrees and work high-paying jobs?

Alexis de Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America*, completed in 1840, answers these questions. As a philosopher of loneliness, Tocqueville diagnoses the condition from which we modern people suffer. To read him is to better understand America, the West, and one's own soul. Like all great philosophers, his words are compelling not merely as propositional logic; they reveal the secret strings that organize human life; they show us to ourselves.

Tocqueville sought to understand the democratic age, what we now call modernity. Not only would this age give birth to a new kind of political regime and economic order, it would alter the souls of the people living in it down to their dispositions, habits, and mental world. Tocqueville thought that the democratic man would have new strengths and new challenges to overcome, compared with the premodern man. Alongside his new freedom and comfort, he would struggle to sustain the lasting bonds to family, community, and place that make life worth living. He would be lonely. The democratic man, in other words, is me. And countless studies confirm that I am not alone (no pun intended). Contemporary Americans move constantly, have fewer friends than ever, and lack lasting community.

According to Tocqueville's analysis, modern people are lonely and adrift because they are restless; they struggle to stay in one place long enough to form abiding relationships. To attenuate this tendency, Tocqueville suggests that democratic people voluntarily reattach themselves to other people, primarily through local government, religious affiliation, voluntary associations, and family life.

Privacy - Terms

Restlessness versus Roots

The modern world is a place of rapid change and a frantic pace of life. “Scarcely have you descended on the soil of America when you find yourself in the midst of a sort of tumult,” writes Tocqueville, “a confused clamor is raised on all sides … around you everything moves.” Restlessness takes many forms: market commerce, democratic governance, ceaseless migration, and more. New products and services come into the world daily; new markets emerge in far-off places; new laws are enacted; people move away, change jobs, and seek happiness elsewhere. Tocqueville observes, “a man carefully builds a dwelling in which to pass his declining years, and he sells it while the roof is being laid … he embraces a profession and quits it. He settles in a place from which he departs soon after so as to take his changing desires elsewhere.” Americans are always on the move.

Tocqueville contrasts the frantic movement of democracy to the calm of a premodern village. Villagers were not rushing around trying to make a fortune; they were not changing professions and moving residences; new laws were rarely enacted; new products rarely came into common use. With a social position fixed in advance, inherited, or determined by law and custom, people of all classes were more commonly tied to their families, their towns, and their neighbors much more concretely than people today. When one’s social position is not going to change, the rational option is to settle in and make the best of your station, rather than strive for an impossible future. This comparison does not aim to wax poetic about the supposed superiority of the past; Tocqueville does not shy away from describing the pervasive inequality, poverty, and powerlessness of the premodern world. It was, nevertheless, a more communal, stable place.

The modern world, on the other hand, is a place of instability and uncertainty. When social class is not fixed in advance by law, all are faced with the unsettling possibility of being either rich or poor. Examples abound of people rising and falling along the economic ladder. Under these conditions, it is natural to be anxious. Tocqueville documents the psychological toll this continuous uncertainty brings about: “the chance of succeeding stirs them, the uncertainty of success irritates them.” Unpredictability, he writes, is “tormenting and fatiguing to souls.”

Vincent van Gogh, *Tree-roots*

This precarity leads to restlessness. Competition is fierce when everyone wants the same thing and considers themselves equally capable of achieving it. Evolutionary biology offers a useful illustration to demonstrate this phenomenon. Among biologists, there is a hypothesis describing the process of evolution known as a "Red Queen Race," drawn from Lewis Caroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, where Alice runs fast but ends right where she started. The Queen retorts "here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." The anecdote is used to illustrate how a species must furiously adapt just to maintain a stationary, stable position. A species must continuously evolve lest it be overtaken by the many other species that evolve successfully. Since the winners are not known in advance, the only chance of survival is adapting. The world of democracy works on the same principle. Without hereditary class distinctions, everyone is trying to get ahead by adapting and seeking opportunities for advancement. The only way to not fall behind is to keep moving.

The restlessness that Tocqueville describes applies not only to wealth and fortune-seeking but to all elements of life. Democratic people move not just for more money, but because they have heard, for instance, that there is a better climate down south. They change jobs because another field might better align with their interests. They try out a new hobby and then drop it quickly. They leave their church and join the one up the road with the better pastor, or they try a new denomination, or they become atheists and stop going to church altogether. What Tocqueville calls the philosophic method of the Americans – the habits of thought that are inculcated by democratic society – further encourages restless experimentation in all matters of life. Americans instinctively reject the wisdom of parents and priests; if all are equal, why defer to the judgment of someone else? The democratic man rejects inherited ways, instead living experimentally, trying out a myriad of options and judging the value of each by his own lights. If authority cannot be relied on, the only way to learn about oneself or the world is to experience and experiment with a variety of different places, careers, hobbies, and religions.

Lasting Relationships

In a world of continuous change, it is difficult to maintain relationships with other people. Family members, friends, and coworkers are constantly being left behind as people move away, change careers, or give up hobbies to start new ones. Human relationships require continuity, time, and frequent contact. They grow slowly and quickly evaporate without these essential ingredients. Transience teaches people to invest less into relationships they know will be jettisoned eventually for opportunities elsewhere. Shallow connections make sense when change is imminent.

In democracies, individuals chase well-being across the country. If they start a family, they do so in their new locale. The networks that are left behind are never as close-knit as the ones in the premodern world. Most grew up in nuclear families that had themselves splintered away from extended family. It is easier to move away from your hometown when there was not much of a community there in the first place. If, on the contrary, moving means leaving behind one's entire family network and decades of friendships, the cost/benefit calculus is different. And it is not only young adults who are quick to relocate; parents and grandparents also restlessly move with the hope of improving their station. Most people pass through many different places without landing permanently in one.

All of this movement leads to an isolating individualism. Individualism "disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends," where he "willingly abandons society at large to itself." Democracy has a fracturing effect on people, who, spurred by dreams of great happiness, focus their efforts on securing a pleasant future for themselves and their family, rather than immersing themselves in the wider community of a neighborhood, town, state, or country.

A transient life not only makes lasting relationships with contemporaries difficult, it also makes tangible connection to past or future generations nearly impossible. Intergenerational community was a ubiquitous part of predemocratic life, where families remained in the same place for centuries. A man who works on the same land as his great-grandfather, or who owns the same estate that will be handed down to his great-grandson, or eats dinner every night with his grandparents, has an intuitive sense of gratitude and obligation to past and future generations. He sees himself on a connected line of ancestors, and has life-long relationships with many relatives. His soul, then, is habitually oriented toward bettering the lives of family members, both dead, living, and not yet born. Seeing himself as part of a family lineage – of landowners, or carpenters, or tradesmen, or tenant farmers – he intuitively recognizes himself as a part of something larger than himself and his immediate family.

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them to continue splintering away from each other.

In a democracy, on the other hand, the bonds between generations fray to the point of severing entirely. Restless movement overwhelms relationships that can only thrive over long periods of time. Relatives play an insignificant role in one's life. "The fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced," Tocqueville concludes, "you easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no idea of those who will follow you." This break from the past produces an inward facing, narcissistic view of the world.

Like a gas released into the open air, democratic people tend to scatter further and further apart until all bonds are dissolved. Lifelong connections to others are harder to form when tight knots of association are loosened or unthreaded entirely. Still, life without knots altogether, Tocqueville thought, would be unlivable. Consequently, Tocqueville believed that people would have to voluntarily rethread themselves to others, tying new knots of their own choosing that would make it more difficult for them to continue splintering away from each other. Democratic people would never allow themselves to be forced into stability – they'd never giving up their freedom entirely – but they might *choose* to become more rooted, if their essential needs and general well-being were supported. These voluntary links encourage face-to-face relations with neighbors, friends, family, and the wider community. The links that Tocqueville prescribes are small-scale participatory democracy, religious worship, voluntary associations, and marriage and family life. Tocqueville believed these rethreading institutions provide invaluable correctives to democratic social fracturing, though they can not entirely resolve the problem. Restlessness will be an ineradicable feature of democratic life; it can be ameliorated but not cured.

Local Governments

In the 1830s, Tocqueville saw that American local governments of small and largely independent towns brought communities together by recruiting residents to participate in local projects. The framers could have organized American society around a large national government that would make decisions for everyone, allowing people to focus on their private endeavors. Instead, they chose to empower township and state governments "in order to multiply infinitely the occasions for citizens to act together." Far off national decisions would not draw people in a community together. Local matters, on the other hand – like the placement of roads, the levying of local taxes, the building of public spaces, and the education of children – inherently draw in community members because they directly affect them.

Local governments, for Tocqueville, exist not to accomplish efficient administrative tasks, but rather for the psychological effects of active participation in government. Putting power into the hands of small local governmental bodies forces people to know their neighbors. Local township government thus minimizes the pernicious individualism pervasive in democratic life. Habits of self-sacrifice and working for the common good are cultivated. Long-term relationships with other community stakeholders thrive in the soil of unified action. Active participation in

government establishes us in a particular place. Common purpose, frequent human association, and stability of residence are all cultivated by local township government, keeping loneliness at bay.

Religious Services

As local government ties neighbors together into a coherent community, so too does religion. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville is primarily concerned with the effect of religious participation on democratic souls, not with the truth or falsehood of any particular religion. Religion, he argues, slows the ceaseless churn of democratic life. Communal religious practice – be it in churches, synagogues, mosques, or elsewhere – mitigates loneliness because everyone congregates together at the same time and place. Whereas the modern world is characterized by people flying off in a million different directions, church-going on the seventh day of the week is the opposite: masses of people, coming from all different places, concentrate at a single point in space and time. The knot, which had been steadily coming loose over the past six days, is tied tight again.

At religious services, relationships can form outside the confines of competition and advancement that permeate the world of labor in the democratic age. Even the restless spirit itself is soothed by religion, which inspires contrary instincts: "there is no religion that does not place man's desires beyond and above earthly goods and that does not naturally raise his soul toward regions much superior to those of the senses." Spiritual contentment weakens the impulse to find fulfillment in ever-changing worldly desires. Communal religious practice is an adhesive that keeps people in place long enough to get to know each other and become meaningfully involved in one another's lives, while making them less likely to seek a change.

Voluntary Associations

Tocqueville was struck by the avidity with which Americans started and joined associations, and saw it as a key corrective to social isolation. Like religious services, associations of all kinds draw people out of their private worlds. "When men are no longer bound among themselves in a solid and permanent manner," Tocqueville writes, "one cannot get many to act in common except by persuading each of them … that his particular interest obliges him voluntarily to unite his efforts with the efforts of all the others." Associations turn powerless individuals into formidable groups; they link together people who would otherwise not meet; they allow forums for discussion and debate that sharpen intellects. Examples in our modern democracy abound: charitable organizations like Habitat for Humanity, sports leagues like the United States Tennis Association, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, advocacy groups like the Sierra Club, neighborhood bridge clubs, and many more.

This advice sounds self-evident: if you want to spend less time at home, join a club, play a sport, or volunteer. But Tocqueville saw it as more than a trite suggestion about putting oneself out

there; indeed, he thought it was impossible to overstate the significance of associational membership to the health of a democracy. “In democratic countries the science of association is the mother science,” he writes, “the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one.” It is in voluntary associations that Americans learn to resist the temptation to live atomized, inward-facing lives.

Family Ties

Lastly, Tocqueville describes the importance of marriage and family life to robust communities. Like the Sabbath, family life works as a respite to the constant change of the democratic world. Tocqueville writes that “when, on leaving the agitations of the political world, the American returns to the bosom of his family, he immediately meets the image of order and peace.” Almost everything moves in our democratic, commercialized world, but Tocqueville suggests that the family is the fixed point around which everything else turns; it is a raft of stability in a sea of instability.

At the same time, having a family anchors you in a particular place, making it more difficult to move on a whim. It’s easy enough to pack up your own stuff and leave town, but having to uproot your children, taking them out of their school community and plopping them down into a new one, is a different ballgame. Having children also puts new importance on living near family, who can share childcare responsibilities and help rear children. A tight network of extended family is most desirable when kids are in the picture. Lastly, a family is its own little community. Even if the moving never stops, and living near extended family is impossible, coming home to people who know and love you keeps loneliness in check.

A Deeply Rooted Forest

Until I read Tocqueville, I didn’t understand why some people are so attached to the institutions of local government, religious worship, voluntary associations, and family life. Through reading him, I learned that these institutions are what attach us to each other. I already knew that I have moved too much, that I am lonely, that I have a restless and ambitious soul, that the only communities I’ve ever felt a part of had expiration dates (graduations), and that everyone I know is separated from people they care about by a constant churn of geographic relocation. I knew this to be true, but didn’t know why it was true until I read *Democracy in America*.

Democracy, argues Tocqueville, has reshaped the world. No longer fixed in place, families rise and fall, people change jobs, hobbies, and locations frequently. Advances in material prosperity and political freedom have been accompanied by a pervasive restlessness. Communities, which were tied together into tight knots in the premodern world, have been untied as people have followed economic opportunity and the chance for greater well-being away from family and birthplace. Many have come to think of themselves in isolation, without considering debts to ancestors past and obligations to future generations. Tocqueville, understanding that this

restlessness is here to stay, proposed partial solutions. As tight knots of relationships kept people in place in the premodern world, often against their will, Tocqueville suggests that people rebind themselves to others voluntarily in the new world.

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The premodern world had long-standing communities, like forests full of tall trees with deep root structures, held in place for hundreds of years by law and custom, growing downward and intertwining with the roots of surrounding trees. Trees with interlocking roots shared resources and provided mutual stability. In the modern world, trees that had spent generations in one place have been dug up and replanted in isolation, again and again, weakening the roots with each new replanting. The roots will never be as strong as they would have been had they not been dug up and severed from the other trees. But with a new set of salutary constraints, this time freely chosen, trees can grow tall again, roots can rebind with the soil and the trees around them. If a forest is not possible in the shifting sands of democratic life, better to plant ourselves in a grove than as a solitary tree. As Tocqueville wrote in a letter near the end of his life: "This profound saying could be applied especially to me: it is not good for man to be alone."

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