

Key Questions

How Do We Come Together When Told to Remain Apart?

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“Without rich long-term relationships, it is simply impossible to live lives of meaning and purpose.”

-- J. Douglas Holladay

After many weeks of closures and stay-in-place orders, cities, states, and countries are reopening. The rate at which this is occurring is uneven. The outcomes are uncertain, prompting angst on two sides. In one camp, there are “the restarters” (those who assert that the cost incurred by keeping the economy closed is too high), and in the other, there are the “quarantiners” (who believe that the health risks outweigh the economic ones).

Curiously, these two groups have seemingly become aligned with America’s two major political parties. In a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, of those who consider themselves as supporters of the Democratic Party, 87% felt that COVID-19-related restrictions lifted too quickly. Of those who identify as supporters of the Republican Party, only 47% felt that such restrictions were lifted too quickly.

Divisions are emerging across other dimensions, including employment status, education, and income. Similarly, “Us vs. Them” sentiments are building beyond the debate over whether to open the economy: Some believe testing is woefully inadequate, whereas others believe sufficient testing exists. Some believe vaccine development should occur as rapidly as possible, while others urge a more cautious and measured approach. There are even widely divergent views over the utility of vaccines themselves.

These divisions underscore the fact that uncertainty is far more considerable than usual: The range of possible outcomes is much broader, and “the tails,” or the outcomes themselves, are much wider.

While this is occurring, feelings of loneliness and isolation are also on the rise. Here, I’m not referring to isolation caused by COVID-19-related containment efforts, although they certainly contributed to its ascent.

Rather, I’m speaking of several secular trends that reveal the fact that our society has turned inward and, as a result, profound implications -- sadly, not many of them positive -- have ensued. For instance, one psychologist noted that “there is evidence that loneliness affects mental and physical wellbeing, and chronic loneliness, moreover, belongs among major health factors such as smoking, obesity and lack of exercise.”

It is not uncommon to presume that loneliness and traditional definitions of success (i.e., job/income status) correlate with each other. As the cliché goes, it’s lonely at the top. Yet, the increase in isolation exists broadly and has transpired even though, through social media and other forms of technology, many appear on the surface to be more connected than ever before.

To explore this topic and recommended remedies, this week, I had the privilege of speaking with Ambassador J. Douglas Holladay. Doug enjoyed storied and distinguished careers in both public policy and finance, consistently demonstrating the ability to serve others and engender trust and confidence.

In his words, his life's mission "has been to create safe spaces for honest inquiry about what truly matters."

In our discussion, Doug implores us to be true to ourselves ("everyone else is taken," he notes), maintain genuine relationships built upon trust and mutual admiration, regularly express gratitude, take "good" risks, and "work to leave a legacy for others."

These are all laudable goals worthy of our aspirations. They won't likely fully eradicate loneliness, nor will they completely close the growing divisions I spoke of earlier. However, I believe that they might help bring us closer together at a time when many of us are apart.

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