

Research Blog: “Habits of the Heart” by Bellah et al.

In my previous excursion, I weighed the three types of historians - monumental, antiquarian and critical - described by German philosopher Nietzsche in the essay “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life.” I aligned my controlling values most closely with the antiquarian historian, whose aim is to preserve historic artifacts and use them to create narratives which give our present condition meaning. In that blog, I was asked some important questions, by Kaytlyn and Drew Kopp, which are pasted and indented below. I want to build off the answers I gave, because reading *Habits of the Heart* has added to my perspective about these questions and answers.

Before getting to that, though, some context and exploration of *Habits of the Heart*. This book, written by a group of sociologists and philosophers, is a popular interpretation of American society first published in 1985. Robert Bellah and the rest of the authors conducted over 200 interviews with Americans over the course of five years to investigate American individualism. (They have a disclaimer that they focused mostly on white, middle-class people, which I felt was important to note.) The title of the book comes from French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville’s studies of American democracy in the mid-1800s: habits of the heart are the mores that made up American character, like family, religion and involvement in politics. But one of the characteristics that Tocqueville feared could lead to the downfall of American culture was individualism.

Individualism was what allowed the country to fight against British rule during the American Revolution. It was the Declaration of Independence from the culture of the old world and the declaration of an American culture. And when all the towns were small and every man was a self-employed farmer who owned his own land, and every wife and child helped tend the family farm, individualism was what held communities together, Bellah *et al* wrote. Their sense of civic duty encouraged them to work for a common good, because, since their communities were so small, they could see directly where the benefits of their contributions were going. And later, individualism was what allowed pioneers to migrate west and claim the wild frontier with anticipation as much as fear.

Tocqueville was studying Americans during the midst of the Industrial Revolution, the period when mechanisation first allowed for the mass production of goods in the nation. There were less independent farmers and more corporations employing vulnerable laborers. Bellah *et al* write that “Factories had concentrated great numbers of poor and dependant workers, often women and immigrants, into rapidly growing mill towns” mostly in the Northeast (p. 41). Tocqueville noted this as the beginning of the entrepreneur “who generated private wealth and control on a previously unheard-of scale” (p. 42). Bellah *et al* called this “utilitarian individualism,” which “sees human life as an effort by individuals to maximize their self-interest relative to these given ends” (p. 336). Tocqueville feared that the individualism that led this class division, if left unchecked, would culminate in despotism, which could mean tyranny or dictatorship and the end of American culture. (Orwell would have agreed. See: *Animal Farm*.)

As those corporations grew and grew, the work that employees did for them became less and less rewarding because it was more difficult to see how their work was benefitting anyone. Work was

less about a “calling” -- a role someone has because they want to contribute to the common good -- and more about supporting one’s own interests. An example the authors give is a lawyer defending a corrupt corporation because it pays better than, say, representing a nonprofit. People’s motivations to work were money and power -- “climbing the corporate ladder” “to take care of one’s own” (to use two cliches). Small towns were now big cities, where the plights of others were easier to ignore because of the impersonal facelessness of “life in the fast lane” (Oof, another cliché). The sentiment was generally, if you have to work to help someone, you may as well work to help yourself, right?

It doesn’t help matters that these giant companies often have offices all over the nation, and notoriety and financial gain often involve getting promoted, which usually means picking up and leaving one’s town. There are more people who live where they live *not* because they have ties to the area, but because “it happens to be conveniently located for them and the housing prices there happen to fit their budgets” (p. 11). If people don’t share a history with or interdependency on the people that surround them or the place they live, they probably live in a “lifestyle enclave.” The opposite of a community, a lifestyle enclave is a group who have “shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities” (p. 335) which usually lead to homogeneity and things like gated communities. Or, as Carole King put it, “Rows of houses that are all the same, and no one seems to care.”

DM: How can the lifestyle enclave phenomena be addressed. Are there any communities/areas that have successfully addressed this issues?

TH: The problem with lifestyle enclaves is that they’re so difficult for the middle class to avoid being pulled into in contemporary American life (p. 74). However, Bellah *et al* believe “most groups in America today embody an element of community as well as an element of lifestyle enclave,” therefore it’s not so easy to say whether a group is one or the other. They cited the “Japanese-American community” and the “gay community” as examples of groups which they cannot deem a lifestyle enclave or genuine community without more information. It’s really hard though for middle class people to avoid making choices to join lifestyle enclaves, because they have often the mobility to decide where to live, where to work and where to spend their free time. They’re most likely going to make the moves they make so they can be surrounded by people like them. Moving from the center-city to the suburbs or marrying someone from a similar background are two ways lots of middle class people join lifestyle enclaves, and in the process shut themselves off from people who are different from them.

KM: It sounds like this idea of enclaves is a network of controlling values. Can you map them out for us?

TH:

Purpose: When you have ties to where you live, you are part of a genuine community and are more likely to have civic virtue.

Context: When you move somewhere for a job promotion, better climate or a superficial reason like those, you are more likely to be entering a lifestyle enclave, which closes you off from people who are different from you and makes you less likely to have any civic virtue.

Opposing purpose: Moving away from home allows you to break away from oppressive commitments and, in turn, gain the freedom to make your own decisions.

Opposing context: Never moving away from home traps you from new experiences and makes you close-minded.

Hmm, I'm now seeing that both purposes see their contexts as encouraging close-mindedness.

Interestingly, these ways of living also changed the way politics happen in America. The burgeoning bureaucracy of modern society had an “invisible complexity” that scared people away from engaging with its problems. Hence, the voluntary political involvement that characterized small town citizenship was replaced with “interest politics,” which is the politics we have to this day. “In the new climate that dominated the nineteenth century, Americans’ minds turned to private advancement and local economic growth, leaving the weak and distant national government in the hands of a new breed of professional politicians who specialized in the accommodation of interests rather than in civic virtue” (p. 255). The party system we have now, of which Americans have little trust, is interest politics. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when Bellah *et al* were conducting their research and writing *Habits of the Heart*, these realities were still at the heart of “America’s sickness.” Tocqueville would have been appalled, they wrote.

To “transform” American culture, Bellah *et al* wrote, we must implement some reappropriation of “the riches” of our past. They are not calling for a return to the past -- which they acknowledge was oppressive in its own ways -- but rather drawing from and “revitalizing” the good things about the past to address our present needs. “Indeed, the profound yearning for the idealized small town that we found among most of the people we talked to is a yearning for just such meaning and coherence” (p. 282). These things are the virtuous parts of the biblical and republican traditions that made up America’s habits of the heart, like what Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated during the Civil Rights Movement. It is worth noting that the biblical and republican traditions of early America were much different than the ideologies of people who identify with biblical and republican traditions in 2019. (Underlines for emphasis are mine):

Indeed, we would argue that if we are ever to enter that new world that so far has been powerless to be born, it will be through reversing modernity’s tendency to obliterate all previous culture... As Toulmin puts it, “We can no longer view the world as Descartes and Laplace would have us do, as ‘rational onlookers,’ from outside. Our place is within the same world that we are studying, and whatever scientific understanding we achieve must be a kind of understanding that is available to participants within the process of nature, i.e., from inside.” Perhaps nature as perceived by the poet, the theologian, and the scientist may be the same thing after all. At least there is now room to talk about the possibility. And there are parallel developments in the social sciences. There, too, it appears that studying history and acting in it are not as different as we had thought. If our high culture could begin to talk about nature and history, space and time, in ways that did not disaggregate them into fragments, it might be possible for us to find connections and analogies with the older ways in which human life was made meaningful. This would not

result in a neotraditionalism that would return us to the past. Rather, it might lead to a recovery of a genuine tradition, one that is always self-revisiting and in a state of development. It might help us find the coherence we have almost lost (p. 283).

Now, here is the question Drew Kopp asked on my previous blog:

DK: Would you say that we have “lost” the valued practices that serve to preserve our history? What practices have taken over and disclose the world now?

TH: I am not sure that Americans have lost practices that serve to protect our history, rather I am wondering if we have ever had them. From what I have come to understand thus far, American culture is self-destructive: it is always about moving forward, even at the expense of preservation. Perhaps it ignores so much of its past because the country is built upon shameful injustices. The practice of ignoring problems to make them go away might be what it is that Americans do and have always done.

After having read *Habits of the Heart*, which isn't necessarily about preserving historic structures and artifacts, I can see how America's self-destruction is due to individualism and how it destroys more than just material things. However, I am not sure that I still agree with my postulation that America has never had preservation practices. I now wonder if our almost-lost coherence about our culture is what overshadows the importance of preservation. The main difference is that new practices for preservation wouldn't have to be invented, rather just appropriated from practices we already know.

KM: Can you give an example of a practice that might be appropriated from what we already know? Perhaps something you feel strongly about preserving.

TH: In the following paragraph, I give an example of a 1911 statement that can be reappropriated to explain the need for historic districts.

One statement that stuck with me was what Henry Lee Higginson, a leading member of Boston's business establishment, wrote in 1911: “I do not believe that, because a man owns property, it belongs to him to do with it as he pleases. The property belongs to the community, and he has charge of it, and can dispose of it, if it is well done and not with the sole regard to himself or to his stockholders” (p. 260). This can be reappropriated to articulate the importance of historic districts, for example. In *Wildwoods Houses Through Time*, I wrote that historic districts didn't work in Wildwood because most property owners held the belief that municipal regulation of the exteriors of their properties was oppressive to their freedom. In other words, “It's my land and I'll do what I want with it,” an individualist belief that most Americans hold as true. I contrasted that with Cape May, where municipally enforced historic districts preserved the largest collection of Victorian architecture in America. The city tells homeowners how to care for their properties, and in turn, property values are hella high and people visit year-round.

Bellah *et al* asked questions that made their interview subjects stop and really think about their answers. They noticed that subjects had a difficult time articulating exactly why the things that they cared about mattered. Most times, people who were involved in volunteering said

volunteering mattered to them because it made them “feel good about themselves,” but they could not say why. A “second language” helps, but only a few people they spoke to had a second language to use; a few examples of second languages are therapeutic, civic or religious. One interviewee was Cecilia Dougherty, an activist involved with the Democratic party. When asked why she identified with the cause, she made clear that her “sense of purpose in political involvement is not based simply on radical individualism but grounded in the continuity of generations” (p. 160). Her father and grandfather were union members, and her father was once arrested for going on strike. She had self-awareness enough to know why she was the way she was.

DK: Ah yes! This is great. This is one of the most important aims I have as a teacher: that my students acquire and cultivate a “second language” concerning their everyday (inventory informed) understand of their projects, and what makes this possible are significant encounters with conversations that come from unfamiliar places, which then shed light in ways that give you the opportunity to address and thus build this second language.

KM: Professor Kopp, this idea of a second language is very intriguing. Perhaps we can dive deeper into this in class?

Likewise, Kaytlyn asked me a question on the last blog that required me to self-reflect like Cecilia Dougherty.

KM: In addition to the “how” you are going to unite these people, I’m curious to know “why” this is something that is important to you. Why is historical preservation something close to your heart?

TH: That is a really good question and I’m not completely sure what the answer is. It’s possible that I care about history because my family values its heritage and culture. Plus I grew up in Wildwood during the real estate boom of the 2000s and saw the destruction of so much of my town’s culture firsthand. I prevented myself from growing too attached with anything in my town because I knew it would disappear. It was very disheartening and disorienting to watch the places that shaped my childhood erased from existence. But as we were discussing on your blog post, Kaytlyn, I also have a fear of the future which causes me to be nostalgic or interested in retreating into the past because it has already happened and is safer than the uncertainty of the future.

A question I often ask myself is, why am I so content living in the region where I was born and have always lived? In senior year of college, one of my professors routinely sent me and my classmates job listings in other states, telling us we weren’t going to get journalism jobs in the region. We would need to move elsewhere if we wanted to get anywhere in the industry, she would say. Other grads went to Iowa, Alabama and California: rural areas where there weren’t an overabundance of newbies looking for work. I was uneasy about choosing between a journalism career and my friends, family and support groups. I was being told to value the career more than my roots.

Most of the professors or professionals I know do not live in their home region. I often think that eventually I will have to be like them and build a career wherever that career takes me. Another professor who gave my class the move-away-spiel observed that “People from New Jersey never leave New Jersey.” Ouch, but I can get why. Even Bruce Springsteen still lives ten minutes from where he was born.

DM: Harsh sentiment, I can get that it is good advice to go where jobs are more abundant or even the argument that there will be less distractions from launching your career because you will not be surrounded by your friends and family but as someone who can't tear herself away from her tightly woven network I get where you are coming from. I also think how much you care about your community and the history of your community is one of the great things about you Taylor.
 KM: Going off what Donna has said, it also seems like regardless of what journo professors say about having to leave to make it in the industry, you are such a driven person that I think you can--and will--make a career for yourself in the “armpit of America” if that is what you choose to do!

Having read *Habits* makes what those professors said sting less. I am part of a community of memory, and that's more important to me than career status. Communities “have a history -- in an important sense they are constituted by their past -- and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory,’ one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community” (p. 153). My identity is intertwined with my community. It is not that I am afraid to leave home, I simply am now aware of the reason why I care so much about this place that some people call the armpit of America. I'm embracing what I was once insecure about. Therefore, my interest in preservation is part fascination with history and part loyalty to the community.

For anyone who is asking the question “Why am I the way I am?” in their research, I recommend *Habits*, especially the “Finding Oneself” chapter.

KM: *raises hand* I will definitely be checking out this chapter because I can tell from your research that you have answered so many questions for yourself. This blog shows that you took your research, reflected on it, and applied it to yourself to better understand where you come from and why you are the way you are. Honestly, reading through your blog this week is inspiring. I can see you are having this huge moment of clarity!

Regarding future explorations, in addition to reading philosophy and sociology, I am researching how historic registries and historic districts work and how to avoid the mistakes that people sometimes make in implementing them. Along with another Wildwoodian, I'm seeking guidance from the state preservation office about asking a corporation to give their disused building to the city to be leased to the historical society, then getting the building listed on the state register. Wish us luck. Also, the next thing I will read is *The Pine Barrens* by John McFee, per Donna's recommendation.

DM: In your research about avoid mistakes will this explore issues like what happened to the Hugg-Harrison-Glover House, repair and restoration that devalues or disqualifies a property or something like mistakes in filing for protection?

Food for thought:

“The biggest problem we have in all areas of government is that people look to the immediate present rather than to the future. Why? Because we are human. We are great spoilers. That’s the American tradition, isn’t it?” - environmental activist Mary Taylor (p. 193)

DK: Excellent work, Taylor. I appreciate the depth of your reading and the effort to share this so thoughtfully with us.

KM: I agree with Professor Kopp, you did an amazing job. I look forward to hearing more about your research and hope I can read your final journal!