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TIES THAT BIND

Back in the 1830s, when Americans were still grateful to France for helping us win our independence from Britain, a French aristocrat named Alexis de Tocqueville spent nine months touring the raw and rowdy United States. Officially, he was having a look at our prisons; unofficially, he wanted to see how freedom was faring in this new country. Americans made a great noise about liberty, but how did they *use* their liberty? What kind of society were they creating, with their principles of equality, individual rights, and majority rule? How free were they to speak, publish, or even think independent thoughts? After returning home, Tocqueville published his own thoughts in two volumes entitled *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), one of the most durable and prophetic studies of our nation ever written by a foreign visitor.

We could spend the whole evening considering passages from Tocqueville,

without exhausting what he has to teach us. But I will limit myself to a handful of quotations bearing on what he saw as threats to freedom in a democracy.

To begin with, consider his warning about the impact of war:

War does not always give over democratic communities to military government, but it must invariably and immeasurably increase the powers of civil government; it must . . . concentrate the direction of all men and the management of all things in the hands of the administration. . . . All those who seek to destroy the liberties of a democratic nation ought to know that war is the surest and the shortest means to accomplish it (278).

Our history confirms that Americans have been all-too willing, in times of war, to sacrifice freedom in the name of protecting freedom. Recall the persecution of union organizers, socialists, and immigrants during World War I; recall the interning of Japanese-Americans during World War II; the McCarthy witch hunt during the Korean War; or the FBI surveillance on civil rights leaders and peace activists and the killing of students at Kent State and Jackson State during the Vietnam War. Or think of how, in recent months, the president and Congress have framed the so-called Patriot Acts, which curtail civil liberties; and think of how the Pentagon has proposed creating an office of “Total Information Awareness,” empowered to monitor the purchases and phone calls we make, the

books we borrow from the library, the movies we rent, the email messages we send and receive; and think of how our government has launched a pre-emptive war in Iraq and alienated most of our allies—all in the name of a war on terrorism.

Tocqueville might have predicted that opponents of the war in Iraq, or of any American war, would be denounced as unpatriotic. He feared that in a democracy, once the majority has endorsed the government's policy, it is likely to bully the minority into either agreeing or remaining silent. "In the United States," he wrote, "the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own" (148). As a result, he concluded, "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America" (117).

Whatever people may say over their supper tables, in our media—especially television, talk radio, and newspapers—there has been precious little freedom of discussion since the attack of September 11, 2001. Those who argued that the attack was a crime, comparable to the actions of the Mafia or drug cartels, have been drowned out by those who insist that it was an act of war. Those who suggested that U.S. foreign policy, U.S. military interventions abroad, or the behavior of U.S. corporations and intelligence agencies might be at least partly

responsible for the rise of terrorism, have been largely silenced. Those who protested the policies of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, or the International Monetary Fund, claiming that globalization harms both people and planet, have been ridiculed or jailed. Serious debate has all but disappeared from Congress, where the majority behaves just as Tocqueville predicted it would, riding roughshod over dissent.

The pursuit of war and the tyranny of the majority are not the only threats to freedom in a democracy, according to Tocqueville. Equally dangerous are the cult of the individual and the worship of money. “In America,” Tocqueville remarked, “every one finds facilities unknown elsewhere for making or increasing his fortune. The spirit of gain is always on the stretch, and the human mind, constantly diverted from the pleasures of imagination and the labors of the intellect, is there swayed by no impulse but the pursuit of wealth” (159).

Slavery, which Tocqueville abhorred, was one sign that Americans valued money more than equality, whatever the Declaration of Independence might proclaim. If, in this land of opportunity, all men and women are “created equal,” they soon become unequal, divided into the rich, the middling, and the poor. “When the reverence which belonged to what is old has vanished,” Tocqueville wrote, “birth, condition, and profession no longer distinguish men, or scarcely

distinguish them: hardly anything but money remains to create strongly marked differences between them, and to raise some of them above the common level” (pp. 254-55).

The desire to stand out from the crowd seemed to Tocqueville especially pronounced in the young republic. “In democratic communities,” he noted, “each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object, namely, himself” (184). That may sound harsh, but consider, in our own day, how advertising concentrates on flattering and feeding the ego. Consider how we have allowed ourselves to be defined, not as creators or conservers, but as consumers. Consider how we have allowed government to become an arena for divvying up private interests rather than for seeking the common good.

Carried to an extreme, this preoccupation with the self turns into solipsism, as Tocqueville foresaw: “. . . not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (194). Again, that may sound harsh; but what attitude toward our descendants is revealed by our willingness to spend on ourselves five hundred billion dollars more per year than we are willing to pay in taxes? What does it reveal about our attitude toward future generations

that we plan to increase the national debt to something on the order of 10 trillion dollars by the end of this decade?

The tendency toward an exclusive concern for oneself, or at most for one's family, when coupled with the worship of money, leads to the pursuit of private wealth at the expense of the commonwealth. One symptom of that squandering of the wealth we hold in common is the sustained assault on the American land, which was already evident to Tocqueville in the early 1830s: "In Europe," he wrote,

people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them: they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature, and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests which surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight: the American people views its own march across these wilds,—drying swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature (181).

Although many Americans now seek to defend the land from exploitation, the mercenary attitude toward nature still dominates our board rooms and legislatures. Think, for example, of the push to build roads and cut timber in the last wild remnants of our national forests. Or think of the push to drill for oil in the Arctic

National Wildlife Refuge, while the American government, automobile manufacturers, energy companies, and most drivers resist efforts to use more efficiently the oil we already have.

Fortunately, Tocqueville saw a powerful antidote to this worship of private wealth, and that was the willingness of Americans to set aside their individualism and to cooperate in addressing their common needs. “In no country in the world,” he observed, “do the citizens make such exertions for the common weal. I know of no people who have established schools so numerous and efficacious, places of public worship better suited to the wants of the inhabitants, or roads kept in better repair” (68). Everywhere he traveled, he found Americans eager to serve the public good, either through voluntary organizations or through government. “Thus,” Tocqueville concluded hopefully, “the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires, and have applied this new science to the greatest number of purposes” (199).

How could this be? Tocqueville wondered. How could these Americans, in some ways so selfish, in other ways be so generous, cooperative, and altruistic? “Is this the result of accident?” he mused, “or is there in reality any necessary connection between the principle of association and that of equality?” (199) I

believe that there is indeed a connection between our ideal of equality and our willingness to serve the community. No matter how far we may be from living up to that ideal, it remains a standard for us, calling us out of our self-concern to a concern for the needs of other people.

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I have begun by recalling a few observations made by this shrewd French visitor because it seems to me that the fate of freedom in America still depends on the rival tendencies that Tocqueville recognized a hundred and seventy years ago. On one side is the worship of private wealth, which leads to a negative view of liberty as a kind of splendid isolation from the wants and needs of other people. On the other side is a concern for the common wealth, which leads to a positive view of liberty as a way of dwelling with others in community, a condition that depends on practicing justice, dealing openly and honestly, avoiding extreme inequalities, and protecting the health of our shared world.

Right now in America the fuller view of liberty is in danger of being eclipsed by the narrower one. The dominant media in our society—including most television programs, films, magazines, Internet sites, and advertisements—tell us that happiness, freedom, and security are to be found through piling up money and buying things. Whatever threatens us, money will keep it at bay; whatever

hollowness we feel, shopping can fill it. A recent billboard for cigarettes used the slogan, “Get More Stuff,” and that might serve as the motto for our entire commercial culture.

Our political culture delivers pretty much the same message—which isn’t surprising, since the corporations that flood the media with their ads also fund political campaigns. After the September 11th attacks, when Americans longed to know how we could help our country, politicians told us to run up some debt on our charge cards. When Americans wondered how we could reduce our dependence on oil, and thus our entanglement with despotic regimes in the Middle East, our leaders told us to hit the roads and fill the airports. As we look around at this richest of nations and see debt piling up, hospitals closing, schools failing, forests dying, prison populations swelling, farmland disappearing under subdivisions and malls, children going without medical care, and countless people sleeping on the streets, our leaders offer us a tax cut, so we’ll have more money in our pockets. And 40% of those cuts will go to the richest 1% of Americans, who already have more money in their pockets than they know what to do with.

Tocqueville would have recognized this pattern all too well. For the past two decades, U.S. politics has been dominated by efforts to ransack the commons, increasing the wealth of a few at the expense of the many. This plundering might

take the form of clear-cutting in national forests, drilling in wildlife refuges, grazing on public lands at below market costs, tax subsidies for the nuclear industry and agribusiness, pork barrel highway projects, industrial pollution of air and water and soil. The looting of the commons has been carried out through the privatizing of prisons, the use of tax dollars for religious schools, the commercial rip-off of the airwaves and the Internet, the scouring of the oceans by factory ships, the draining of aquifers for development, the opening of parks to snowmobiles, the patenting of organisms, the elimination of the estate tax, and so on. The net result of all this plundering is to diminish the wealth we hold in common.

Our politicians, manufacturers, and merchants seem not to notice that we hold any wealth in common. The story they tell is almost entirely about private wealth and private solutions. If the streets are unsafe, instead of reducing the poverty that causes crime, buy an alarm system, move into a gated community, pack a gun. If the public schools are failing, instead of fixing them, put your kids in private schools. If the water is tainted, don't work to end pollution; buy your own supply in bottles. If the roads are clogged, don't push for public transportation; buy a bigger car. If cancer is epidemic, instead of addressing the causes, try the latest therapies. If Social Security looks insecure, instead of overhauling the system to safeguard everyone, funnel the dollars into private

accounts, so those who guess right on the market will win and those who guess wrong will lose.

A week before the September 11th anniversary, a two-page ad in the *New York Times* for a “freedom phone” used the slogan, “Get More,” and then listed two dozen things you would get more of by purchasing this product, including more laughs, more party invites, and more second glances; with this phone you’d also get more friendly, available, motivated, and involved; you’d get more time with your kids, more of what you want, “more and more and more.” Those claims are almost entirely false, of course, and we could laugh them off if they weren’t beamed at us, on behalf of one product or another, through every channel of communication, twenty-four hours a day.

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The consumer wooed by all the ads is the unbridled ego identified by Tocqueville. This ideal consumer thinks only about himself—his appearance, pleasure, and power. He feels no gratitude to the countless people, living and dead, whose labors support him. He is scarcely aware that he lives on a planet along with millions of other species, or that he draws every drop of his existence from the wellspring of Nature. He looks no deeper for meaning than his own cravings. While the world decays around him, he tries to buy his way to happiness

and security, as if he could withdraw inside a fortress of money. The story of the jolly purchaser of stuff is a self-centered fantasy that leads to loneliness for the individual and disaster for the world.

If we saw ourselves, instead, as creators and conservers, we would measure our wealth by the well-being of family, friends, and neighbors. We would understand that our own health and the health of everyone we love depends on the health of our communities, on the air and water, the parks and schools, the councils and courts. We would see ourselves as belonging not merely to a city or a country, but to a watershed, a bioregion, and ultimately to the Earth. Rather than chasing after fashion, we would savor everyday gifts. We would turn off the ads and seek joy in the voice of a child or a bird, in music and books, in gardening and strolling, in sharing food and talk. We would find meaning in caring for other people and for our home places. To live in such a way, we don't need to be saints or sages; we need simply be awake to the real sources of freedom and the good life.

I'm guessing that everyone hearing these words has at least glimpsed this vision. You've dreamed of living in a household and a neighborhood suffused with love and respect. You've dreamed of living in a community that is just, beautiful, harmonious, and durable, a community that values all its citizens, that makes room for other species, that draws energy from wind and sun, that meets

many of its own needs from local sources, that nourishes learning and the arts, and that protects these blessings for future generations. You've dreamed of belonging to a nation of such communities, and to a world of such nations.

The work of creating wise and loving communities begins with cherishing our common wealth. I speak of it as "common" because it's ordinary and because it's shared. By "wealth" I don't mean money, but the actual sources of well-being. I mean the soils, waters, and atmosphere; the oceans and prairies and forests; the human gene pool and the plenitude of species. I mean language in all its forms, including mathematics and music; every kind of knowledge, from folklore to physics; and all manner of artifacts, from satellites to shoes. I mean the practical arts such as cooking, building, herding, and farming; the art of medicine; the traditions of civil liberty and democratic government. I mean wildlife refuges, national parks, and wilderness areas, as well as museums, libraries, and other public spaces.

You won't see these treasures for sale in the mall. You won't see them advertised on TV. You won't discover them in corporate balance sheets or the Gross National Product. You'll rarely hear them spoken of with pride by politicians, who seem hell-bent on auctioning off everything that might have the word "public" attached to it.

Where you're likely to hear people talking about our common wealth is at a block party, a union meeting, a street festival, or a concert in the park. You're likely to hear such talk among people cleaning up a river, planting trees on a ravaged hillside, reclaiming an abandoned rail yard for a playground, or raising funds for a school. In short, you'll hear testimony to our shared wealth wherever people come together to preserve, restore, or create something for the good of the community, and not merely for their own private advantage.

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What's being sold to us every day as the "American way of life" is mostly a cheat and a lie. It's an infantile dream of endless consumption, endless novelty, and endless play. It's a pacifier for the ego to suck on. It's bad for us and bad for the Earth. It is a form of tyranny rather than freedom.

We need a new vision of the good life. We need a dream worthy of grown-ups, one that values simplicity over novelty, conservation over consumption, harmony over competition, and community over ego.

Fortunately, many people sense this need. Across our country and around the world, people are shaping a new story about the sources of peace and plenty. You can see the story come alive in farmers' markets, Habitat for Humanity building sites, food coops, town theaters, land trusts. You can witness the story

unfolding in citizen forums and simple living collectives, in hospices, in shelters for abused women and children, in efforts to restore eagles or wolves to places where they once flourished. Those who are acting out this new story are recovering wisdom known to our ancestors, as Tocqueville observed, but largely forgotten in this hectic, narcissistic age.

Love of our common wealth is the root impulse behind the countless acts of gratitude and kindness that ordinary people perform every day. We all feel it, but we don't always know how to speak of it, or we speak of it so quietly that our story is drowned out by the blare of consumerism.

We need to speak up, to say boldly why we fight for good schools, why we build houses for the homeless, why we protect open space, why we look after the ailing and the elderly, why we pay taxes without grumbling, why we honor government as a defender of the common wealth. In a culture drunk on private greed, we need to declare why we're committed to the public good. In a society obsessed with competition, we need to say why we practice cooperation. In a culture addicted to instant gratification, we need to champion long-term-healing and the welfare of future generations.

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In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the sources of public security we

hear about most often are the armed forces, police, CIA, and FBI. The sources of private security we hear about are guns, alarms, and bank accounts. In the name of security, politicians offer us trillion-dollar missile shields, the Pentagon and their legions of contractors sell us whiz-bang weapons, developers peddle homes protected by fences and guards, car companies push four-wheel drive, and investment companies prod us to grab a piece of the rock.

But money and military force are not the best guarantees of our security. The root meaning of the word “secure” is to be free of care or concern. Think of all that would be required to free us from care. True, we sometimes need warriors and sleuths to defend us. But we also need to know that our children can play outside without danger, that we can safely drink the water and breathe the air, that we can count on a supply of nutritious food. We need shelter that’s dry and warm. We need reliable neighbors. We need to trust that our jobs won’t disappear at the whim of global corporations. We need to know that we’ll be looked after when we fall sick and when we grow old.

By these measures, tens of millions of Americans are insecure, and no additions to the Pentagon budget will free them from care. Real security begins not with weapons or balance sheets but with membership in a loving community in a vibrant landscape, a community devoted to the well-being of all its members and

to the health of its home ground. When we embrace that vision and work to achieve it, we'll have reason to consider ourselves true patriots.

In spite of what the media tell us, we know that the good life is not for sale. We understand that the good life is something we make together in households and communities, in partnership with other people and in harmony with Nature. We realize that happiness, health, and freedom come to us largely as gifts, and we feel called to preserve those gifts, enhance them if we can, and pass them on.

The glorification of private wealth will go on around the clock, in every medium, without any help from us. We need to counter that chorus by lifting our voices in praise of the wealth we share, recalling how our lives depend on one another, on generations past and future, on the bountiful Earth and all its creatures, on the spirit that lifts us into being and sustains us through every moment and reclaims us in the end.

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Let me close with a personal story, to suggest why I have been thinking so much lately about the meaning of freedom and the future of the planet.

Last December, after crossing the stage at graduation, my daughter stopped before one of her professors, removed the mortarboard cap, and tilted her head forward to receive the red and white satin loop signifying that she had earned a

Ph.D. in biology. When Eva straightened again, she was beaming. Watching her from my seat among the faculty, wearing my own doctoral regalia and goofy hat, I felt as though I might rise into the air, hoisted by joy. I turned to scan the audience until I spied the white blaze of my mother's hair where she sat in a wheelchair, my wife beside her, Eva's husband and his parents and several friends nearby, all of them cheering.

Hundreds of other students trooped across the stage, while thousands of parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and lovers roared their praise. No meter could measure the energy of delight that filled the auditorium.

After the ceremony, the graduates in their raven-black gowns marched out to the music of a brass band, and when they filed into the lobby, nearly every one was engulfed by a laughing, clapping, hugging, kissing family, as we surrounded Eva. But I couldn't help noticing that a few graduates crossed the lobby alone, clutching their diplomas, picking their way through the jubilant crowd toward the exit. As one of these loners passed close to us, a scrawny young man with a limp, I was tempted to grab his elbow and draw him into our circle. But I realized this was the sort of impulse in me that had struck Eva as weird when she was growing up, so I let the young man shuffle by.

Amid so much rejoicing, we had to shout to make ourselves heard. We told

Eva's husband, Matt, that he should get a degree for supporting her through the six years of study that led to this day. "You deserve a Ph.D. in husbandry," I said.

The black swatch of Matt's beard cracked into a smile. His parents gave Eva a basket for her knitting. From the wheelchair, my mother grasped Eva's hand and said, "You've cut your hair."

"Yes," Eva replied, fingering the blond hair, once shoulder length, that now curled just past her ear. "To keep it out of the baby's reach."

No swelling showed under the loose gown, but when my turn came to hug Eva, I could feel the hard mound of her belly. We had known for some months that she was "with child," as people used to say. Since hearing the news, everyone who loves her had been with child. The knowledge bound us all closer together, family and friends, and it filled me with elation, as if I were breathing helium, casting off the weight of years.

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Films of astronauts floating free inside their ships, or drifting outside in space, suggest how exhilarating it might be to escape the constraints of gravity. As a teenager, aspiring to become an astronaut, I dreamed of such freedom. I envisioned myself tumbling head over heels within an orbiting capsule, like a carefree babe in the womb, or jetting about in a spacesuit through the void, without

so much as an umbilical cord tying me to the mother ship. Mixed in with the longing to fly, which perhaps all humans feel, was an adolescent's longing to shake off every tether, to run my life without answering to anybody else, to become utterly, and singly, free.

Love soon complicated that longing. I fell in love with a girl, who fell in love with me, and by the time we left our teen years behind we were talking of marriage. My college buddies were appalled by the idea. How could you give up playing the field at twenty-one? they asked. How could you bind yourself to one person forever and ever?

Ruth and I went through with our wedding anyway, and now, after thirty-six anniversaries, we're still happy with our choice. If you're serious about marriage, it's true that you must give up some liberties. You must not only be sexually faithful, you must also share money, food, rooms, plans, chores, and conversation with another person, day in and day out. If you bring children into the world, you share responsibility for their care and guidance. At some point, you're likely to become responsible for helping look after one another's parents. Odds are, one of you will sicken as you age, and the other will become a nurse. Eventually, one of you will die, and the other will be left to carry on alone. Many marriages break up because one or both partners can't bear such restraint or the prospect of such loss.



Life in family cured me of my adolescent notion that to be free means to cast off all ties, for I discovered a richness in being a husband and father and son that I had never experienced as a child who looked out only for myself. I learned that the gambols of astronauts tumbling in zero gravity are deceptive, for the longer these travelers remain in space, the more muscle and bone they lose. Like it or not, contending with gravity makes us strong. In the same way, contending with the weight of responsibilities, especially to the people we love, builds strength of mind, emotion, and character. Clearly, if we are answerable to too many people, we may stagger under the load; but if we are answerable to no one except ourselves, we are likely to become brittle and weak.

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When you glue several planks together edge to edge, you make the whole expanse of wood stronger and less likely to warp by aligning the boards so the grain in each one runs contrary to the grain in the adjacent board. That's easier said than done, because the grain in wood, like the grain in people, can be hard to read.

“Does this look like the grain's curved up?” Eva's husband Matt asked me, staring at the end of a sweet-smelling cherry plank.

“I'd call that up.” I squinted harder. “Or maybe down. It can't decide.”

Matt laughed, and we bent closer to the wood. “Up,” we finally agreed, then moved on to examine the next plank.

Since Eva’s graduation, he and I had been spending Sunday afternoons in the well-equipped shop in his father’s basement, slowly turning a cherry log into a dresser for the baby’s room. Beginning with rough boards still clad in bark, we sawed and planed the cherry until it was smooth enough for gluing. Once the sides and top were laid out, we would build the frame using mortise and tenon joints. Then we would build the drawers, dovetailing the corners. Then we would sand it all and seal it with a finish that was safe enough for a baby to bite.

Before we moved this dresser into the bedroom that Eva and Matt were preparing as a nursery, every joint would have been inspected, every square inch would have been touched a hundred times by Matt or me or by Matt’s father Don, who worked alongside us on many of these Sunday afternoons. As we breathed the sawdust, our tongues tasting of cherries, we talked about how the dresser’s top would be a good place for changing diapers, how this drawer might hold shirts, that drawer might hold pants, and another one might hold those impossibly tiny socks.

So we framed the dresser not only with our hands but also with our hearts—three men expecting a baby. Because we laid the grain of our love

alongside the grain of wood, the dresser would be stronger, truer, finer, less likely to warp, than if any one of us had tried to make it alone.

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The word *free* derives from an Indo-European root meaning to love. The same root gave us *friend*. I don't know how scholars interpret this etymology, but what it suggests to me is that freedom is not possible in isolation, but only in relationship—in the give-and-take of affection and responsibility.

As we awaited the baby's birth, I kept thinking about the graduates who had no one with whom to share their triumph, the ones who shuffled alone toward the exit. How could one bear life without having anyone to share the sweetness and sorrow? I also kept thinking of an old-fashioned phrase for the powerful links we experience within families: "ties that bind." It's a two-sided expression. On one hand, a family constrains us; it requires us to take into account the needs, moods, schedules, and fates of other people. On the other hand, these relationships stitch us into a reality larger than our own isolated ego; they weave us into the web of life.

Eva's baby entered the world last April, in a time of terror and war, a menacing time that threatens to last for years. The baby also entered a circle of people who were and are prepared to adore her, nurture her, help her grow up

healthy and whole. There is no guarantee of kindness in this chancy world, but a loving family is a good place to start.

