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Cultural Commentary: Held by Many Threads

by William Levin

Occasionally, without warning or apparent context, I am visited by vivid replays of sights, sounds and even smells from my past. Recently, I was thinking of not much at all when I suddenly daydreamed a view of my college roommate's bedroom. It took a few days for me to figure out why the memory had come back to me, but in order to explain the why of this, let me first describe the actual flashback.

The year was 1967 and Carl and I were sharing an apartment in Kenmore Square during our senior years at Boston University. It was one of those converted brownstones with tall ceilings and ornate plaster moldings. One night the upstairs neighbors had a raucous party and managed to dislodge a large chunk of the molding with their aggressive dancing. Given that the thing must have weighed twenty pounds, it's a good thing that it fell on Carl's bed on one of the rare occasions when Carl was not in it.

After weeks of trying to get the landlord to fix it back in place, Carl gave up and tied it to a big hook in the ceiling with the cord from his bathrobe. It was suspended about four feet below the ceiling, and Carl could just walk under it without braining himself. He grew fond of the thing, arguing that the craggy back end of it looked something like Lyndon Johnson or Barbara Streisand, depending on the light. Carl continued to work on what he called his 'installation,' mostly by tying thin strings of cheap packing twine around the blob and running them to various spots along the wall and ceiling, where he attached them with thumbtacks. In a few months the web of filaments was impressive. There must have been nearly a hundred, and the chunk of plaster at their center seemed like the core of some important structure.

One night, while admiring the new lighting that Carl had arranged to show off the complexity of his whatever-it-was, we noticed that its original support, the bathrobe tie, had gone slack. It wasn't doing anything to hold up Barbara's head. So he delicately reached into the mess and snipped the tie, top and bottom, with a scis-

sors. It remained that way until we moved out after graduation that year, a marvel of engineering, solid and stable in its web-of-a-hundred- threads. Reasoning that failure to remove the thing might diminish the likelihood of getting our apartment deposit back, we cut it down on our last night in the apartment. Working our way around the room and cutting one string at a time, we had to cut nearly 80% of the threads before the chunk fell.

When images like this pop to the conscious level of my life, I like to figure out why. After all, we can't have our brains randomly interrupting our lives for their own amusement. Often, the explanation is fairly simple, like the time I could distinctly smell the cafeteria string beans from my elementary school days. In this case it turned out that I was remembering that particular smell because at that moment I was visiting an elementary school. They must still have been using the same sort of industrial food supplies forty years later. Context discovered. But in the case of Carl's bedroom, I had no such obvious link. I think I now know why this memory came back to me. I think it was the way people have been behaving since September 11th, and here's my reasoning.

Since the attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. and the crash in Pennsylvania, Americans have behaved in some very unusual ways. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the crashes, millions of people apparently got in touch with loved ones to 'make sure everyone was O.K.'

This was completely understandable for those with loved ones in the disaster areas, but the great majority of these calls were in areas where there was no reasonable expectation that people were in danger. Students told me that they had called parents, friends, spouses, girlfriends and boyfriends at work in the Boston area and in other parts of the country 'just to check in.'

One man who was interviewed by a reporter in Boston said he called his wife at home in Newton three times during the first day to 'stay in touch.'

I found many more examples of this sort of behavior. People have been speaking to strangers in ways they normally do not. I found out about the crashes when

a woman I did not know stopped me in the college parking lot and asked me “Have you heard about the towers?”

Of course, I had no idea what she was talking about and asked her what she meant. At the time she had little information, and left me with more questions than answers. So, I stopped in the entryway of my office building to watch a television and to talk with people who were also watching. A full month later strangers are still talking to one another at an unprecedented rate. For example, at Logan airport I recently waited in a snake of a line for almost two hours to check my baggage, during which time conversation between strangers was the rule.

Americans have been expressing their patriotism with flags on their homes, cars and in public places such as highway overpasses. They are writing letters-to-the-editor at a record rate. They are donating huge amounts of money for relief funds and blood for victims of the attacks. They are volunteering for public service (especially the military), and children are suddenly asserting that they want to be firefighters and police officers when they grow up. The rates of marriage are up, and of divorce are down.

So, what does all of this have to do with Carl’s room sculpture? As a sociologist, my thirty-year career has had an underlying theme that is common to anyone in the field. It is the desire to understand social connection. One of our founding thinkers, the French intellectual Emile Durkheim, set the goal for sociology in 1893 when he coined the term ‘social fact.’

He recognized that the connections between the members of a society are as real as the forces that hold the physical world together. We seem to have no problem believing in the reality of physical forces. Perhaps it is because we have daily evidence of their existence. For example, though we never see gravity itself, we know all too well that it affects every object as we watch a waterfall, or see a great skyscraper fall into itself. However, under normal circumstances, such as those that exist in our un-remarkable, everyday existence, we are unaware of social bonds. However, the social facts that form the



connections of all Americans were brought into sharp relief after September 11. We don’t use Durkheim’s term “social fact” in our normal talk. However, people do use the term “social fabric” to describe the way we are connected. When Americans called one another to “check in to see if you are O.K.”; when they spoke to strangers and displayed American flags as symbols of citizenship; when they gave money, blood and worry and even when they indulged in a desire to broadly distinguish between “we” and “they,” Americans were reaffirming that the fabric was intact.

In my professional life I knew how to use the language of my field to describe this to my students. I spoke about Durkheim’s ideas and about how the social fabric was being brought to light and tested by Americans because it was comforting in such dangerous times to do so.

But my subconscious mind was drawn back to the sculpture in Carl’s bedroom, and to the unlikely ability of hundreds of thin threads to support such a heavy load. The web of connections in our lives gains strength in numbers, and when we need to support a heavy weight, it is good to touch as many of the threads as possible so we can believe it to be as real as gravity.

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