

37. Individual versus Collective

Deeply rooted in our culture is an idea and value of rugged individualism. Communicating only by spitting, a cowboy hero rides into town, kills all the bad guys, for good, then rides out of town, not needing or wanting anything from anybody, just individually making the world a little better. Self-sufficient, free and righteous. Glorious! We love, admire and idolize it. Individualism is very American.

Not everyone wants to be that way. Some are too timid, or would wilt by disposition in the loneliness. Many have other just as valid ideas and values and ways of engaging and living, like creating and enjoying loving relationship, raising children to be better than we are, making community work, sharing great works of art, architecture, engineering, music or science, contributing for the benefit of others we know well and care about, raising consciousness, or working to advance collective knowledge and skill.

Many of these other life engagements have a living social context the disengaged rebel and rugged individual engages with dysfunctionally. Individual social engagement works, or doesn't, for various reasons. Sometimes, the individual is unable to connect with others because of poor social skills. Sometimes, it's from disagreement about values, beliefs, practices, behaviors, rules or past wrongs. Sometimes, the individual is a sociopath. Sometimes, she's a hero, because she disengages with a corrupt and broken society to seek and explore alternatives, or for the opportunity to live with integrity.

The individualist often strives to not need anybody else's help. We're independent and free to think, say and do what we want. If we disagree with others, we ride off and forget about them. But that doesn't mean they or what we disagree with disappear. The individual and collective views always exist. There are always me and there are always we perspectives. They're all valid and live in the same world.

When individual behaviors, values and actions bump into collective rules, desires, behaviors and actions, many individualists want to reject the collective in favor of being and doing whatever they want. Stay out of my business! I do what I want. Leave me alone. I'm right; you're wrong. Go away! But that disengages that perspective from the collective effort to make it work for all. We win when we share.

Some insist on telling others what to do. I'm right. You do what I want you to, or I'll make you. We try to force our will on others through exertions of power in social systems. Abortion, for example. I believe all life is sacred after conception, so you shouldn't be able to end your pregnancy, no matter if you were raped by a diseased maniac alien or are unable to support the baby's life. You should do with your body what I want you to. Well, what gives you the right to tell me what to do with my body? Stay out of my womb unless you're invited! There is such ugliness and vehemence in these disagreements.

In most situations, there are individual perspectives and perspectives of society. I can do what I want. Well, what if everyone did that? We think and do it this way. Well, how do we advance unless somebody tries it other ways? We need to allow lots of little interacting pictures in the big picture.

Similar dynamics, confusions and tensions exist between individual and collective values and views as objective and subjective values and views. All are important, always. Let's allow and respect both. We need balance and harmony between them. We need to hear, consider and respect each other and work things out together. What anyone else thinks and does is as important as what I or we think or do. We need to thrive as diverse individuals, and we need to thrive as groups. Be free to be me, but care about the we! Respect! Listen! Let's take care of each other, even in our differences! Allow the personal!