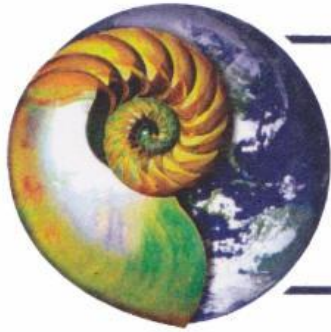




Weaving the Social Fabric



A Reflection on the Impact of Life on Life

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Long before David Brooks wrote *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* and was interviewed about it; long before Brooks started at the Aspen Institute something called *Weave: The Social Fabric Project*; long before I heard the terms, social capital or social fabric, I was the beneficiary of it.

Recently, in a small group setting, I was challenged to list the mentors in my life. I said I could name eleven. "Eleven!" the group leader exclaimed, "Choose one and tell us about that person's impact in your life." So I told them about a woman named Etwell.

Etwell was born 100 years ago in eastern Kentucky, and was my mother's first cousin. She never married, although she had several opportunities. She lived with her family until she was given another family, a second family, to lead. It happened this way . . .

My mother was the eldest of seven children. When she was 13, her father died after an industrial accident at a factory in Michigan, where he was working during WWII. Less than five years later, her mother died after months of illness. There were seven children without mother or father, and none old enough to "be the adult" needed. Extended family considered splitting the children between several households. Then they decided to approach Etwell about taking on the responsibility of these orphaned siblings. I do not know how long the 28-year-old woman thought about it, but she said, "Yes." And she kept saying, "Yes," while six of the seven completed high school, and until all were on their own with jobs and families to support.

Etwell came to our home for several months after I was born, and we bonded well. She changed my diapers and my clothes as needed. After she returned to her home, we visited her often, and spent many holidays and vacations together. Etwell was a significant and integral part of our family's life until she died of cancer when I was in high school. Her influence continues to be felt. She is part of the fabric of our lives, and of my life in particular.

The recent conversation with our small group spurred reflection in me. I decided to think a bit more about people who have impacted my life in significant ways, even if the contact with that person was not prolonged. I grabbed a piece of paper, and over a fifteen minute span, listed about 60+ names. These were family members, teachers, friends, and neighbors. Some I had known all of my life; others, for a season or maybe two. But all had made an impact in my life: the way I see the world or myself; the way I speak, read, or write; or some other aspect of my life. These people, and these relationships, make up the "social fabric" of my life, as it were. Although some are deceased, I remain in contact with a good number of those on this side of eternity.

How could I illustrate "social fabric," I wondered. Not for the first time, I considered my abilities. It seems I am an abstract thinker and a concrete artist. So this project stretched me. Thankfully, an artist friend came to my aid. After our discussion, and two more days of playing with ideas, I decided to actually weave the relationships that are so much a part of my life. I had 24 rolls of ribbon, and a 26-letter alphabet. I have not known many people whose names begin with "Q" or "X," so I eliminated those two letters. Then I assigned each roll of ribbon an alphabet letter.

Next, I used ribbons corresponding to the letters of my first name to establish the horizontal (warp) portion. Using ribbons corresponding to the first name initials of others whose lives have been poured into mine, the weft, or woof, was woven over-and-under the five horizontal ribbons. Etwell's ribbon is the third from the left, after those representing my parents. My ribbon supply was nearly exhausted after only 42 people, and I was in no way nearly finished. So some of the ribbons are playing multiple roles, representing a number of people with the same first initial. I anchored the ribbons with dressmaker pins -- because, after all, this is still a work in progress -- and photographed the work (above). This, then, is one rendition of social fabric, visualized.

This Christmas and holiday season, I challenge you, dear reader, to reflect on the people who have impacted your life for the good, helping you to become who you are today. Whether your weaving of the social fabric is an internal one, or takes shape in tangible form, it is a good exercise. Our lives shape one another as iron

sharpens iron. And gratitude -- including to and for those whose lives have impacted ours -- molds us in pleasing ways.

Special Note: A lecture by [Senator Ben Sasse](#) in April, and a conversation between Drs. Robert George and Cornel West last week -- both events of the Trinity Forum held at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, TN -- contributed to my thinking about social fabric. I had already been introduced to the concept of "social capital" through Robert D. Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Going back further, the importance of social associations was noted by Alexis De Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America*: "If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve."

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With gratitude for your readership and support,
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