

GOING
SOLO

THE EXTRAORDINARY RISE
AND SURPRISING APPEAL
OF LIVING ALONE

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THE PENGUIN PRESS

New York

2012

INTRODUCTION: THE SINGLETON SOCIETY

IN THE BEGINNING of the Old Testament, God creates the world one day at a time: The heavens and the earth. Water. Light. Day and night. Living species of every kind. After each creation, God declares: "It is good." But the tone changes when God makes Adam. Suddenly, God pronounces the first thing that is not good, *lo tov*: "It is not good that the man should be alone."¹ So God makes Eve, and Adam is no longer on his own.

In time, injunctions against being alone moved from theology to philosophy and literature. In *Politics*, Aristotle wrote, "The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god." The Greek poet Theocritus insisted that "man will ever stand in need of man," and the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius proclaimed that "human beings are social animals."²

So, too, are other animals. (Aristotle, alas, was only half right.) Beasts will indeed live on their own when conditions favor it, particularly when there is a shortage of food. Otherwise most species fare better in

groups. Collective living carries some costs, including competition for status and occasional outbursts of violence. But the benefits—protection from predators, cooperative hunting, efficient reproduction, among others—can easily outweigh them. Our closest animal relatives, the apes, are typically social and live in stable units. Even orangutans, which are notoriously solitary, live with their mothers during their first seven or eight years, and as the Dutch primatologist Carel van Schaik has discovered, orangutans living in a calorically rich swamp forest in Sumatra are “every bit as sociable” as their cousins, the chimpanzees.³

Orangutans are not the only misrepresented creatures. Hermit crabs, it turns out, are actually quite social, living in communities of up to one hundred because they cannot thrive alone. One manual for prospective pet owners advises that “it’s best to always have at least two hermit crabs in a tank—if possible at least two of each species.” Not because they need protection or help with food gathering, but for a simpler reason: When alone, hermit crabs get stressed and unhealthy. Their bodies fail them. They may even lose a leg or a claw.

Isolation can also be unbearably stressful for people, as policy makers in different historical eras have recognized. In the ancient world, exile ranked among the most severe forms of punishment, exceeded only by execution. (Though some called exile a fate worse than death.) During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern prison systems popularized the use of solitary confinement because, as the English jurist William Paley put it, isolation “would augment the terror of the punishment” and thereby deter crime.⁴ Today, the United States alone detains roughly 25,000 people in “supermax” prisons where, one prominent psychologist writes, inmates “experience levels of isolation . . . that are more total and complete and literally dehumanized than has been possible in the past.”⁵ A common phrase used to describe this condition conveys one widespread belief about being cut

off from others: It is, say both critics and advocates of solitary confinement, a “living death.”

Nothing better expresses the human interest in collective living than the formation of families. Throughout history and in all cultures, families, not individuals, have been the fundamental building blocks of social and economic life. And for good reason. As evolutionary biologists argue, living with others offered a competitive advantage to members of the first human societies because it provided security, access to food, and a means of reproduction. Through natural selection, argue the social scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, our species developed a genetic disposition to establish close social ties.⁶

In 1949, the Yale anthropologist George Peter Murdock published a survey of some 250 “representative cultures” from different eras and diverse parts of the world. He reported, “The nuclear family is a universal human social grouping. Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society. No exception, at least, has come to light.”⁷

Since then, scholars have challenged Murdock’s argument, identifying domestic arrangements, such as the kibbutz, that don’t fit into his nuclear model. Yet their counterexamples are always alternative collectives, typically including more people than the conventional family. Though this debate remains unsettled, there’s one thing both sides would agree on: Human societies, at all times and places, have organized themselves around the will to live with others, not alone.

BUT NOT ANYMORE.

During the past half century, our species has embarked on a remarkable social experiment. For the first time in human history, great

numbers of people—at all ages, in all places, of every political persuasion—have begun settling down as singletons.* Until recently, most of us married young and parted only at death. If death came early, we remarried quickly; if late, we moved in with family, or they with us. Now we marry later. (The Pew Research Center reports that the average age of first marriage for men and women is “the highest ever recorded, having risen by roughly five years in the past half century.”)⁸ We divorce, and stay single for years or decades. We survive our spouses, and do whatever we can to avoid moving in with others—even, perhaps especially, our children. We cycle in and out of different living arrangements: alone, together, together, alone.

Not long ago, it might have made sense to treat living on our own as a transitional stage between more durable arrangements, whether coupling up with a partner or moving into an institutional home. This is no longer appropriate, because today, for the first time in centuries, the majority of all American adults are single. The typical American will spend more of his or her adult life unmarried than married, and for much of this time he or she will live alone. Naturally, we are adapting. We are learning to go solo, and crafting new ways of living in the process.

Numbers never tell the whole story, but in this case the statistics are startling. In 1950, 22 percent of American adults were single. Four million lived alone, and they accounted for 9 percent of all households. In those days, living alone was by far most common in the open, sprawling Western states—Alaska, Montana, and Nevada—that attracted migrant workingmen, and it was usually a short-lived stage on the road to a more conventional domestic life.

* In this book, I use the term “singletons” for people who live alone. “Singles” may or may not live alone (some live with a romantic partner, or roommates, or children), and so not all singles are singletons.

Today, more than 50 percent of American adults are single, and 31 million—roughly one out of every seven adults—live alone. (This figure excludes the 8 million Americans who live in voluntary and non-voluntary group quarters, such as assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and prisons.)⁹ People who live alone make up 28 percent of all U.S. households, which means that they are now tied with childless couples as the most prominent residential type—more common than the nuclear family, the multigenerational family, and the roommate or group home. Surprisingly, living alone is also one of the most stable household arrangements. Over a five-year period, people who live alone are more likely to stay that way than everyone except married couples with children.¹⁰

Contemporary solo dwellers are primarily women: about 17 million, compared to 14 million men. The majority, more than 15 million, are middle-age adults between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four. The elderly account for about 10 million of the total.* Young adults between eighteen and thirty-four number more than 5 million, compared to 500,000 in 1950, making them the fastest-growing segment of the solo-dwelling population.¹¹

Unlike their predecessors, people who live alone today cluster together in metropolitan areas and inhabit all regions of the country. The cities with the highest proportion of people living alone include Washington, D.C., Seattle, Denver, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Chicago, Dallas, New York City, and Miami. One million people live alone in New York City, and in Manhattan, more than half of all residences are one-person dwellings.

* In this book, I use the terms “old people” and “the elderly” to refer to those age sixty-five and above. The reasons for this have more to do with the statistics on aging, which typically classify people as elderly once they reach age sixty-five, than on an argument about the age when one becomes old.

. . .

DESPITE ITS PREVALENCE, living alone is one of the least discussed and, consequently, most poorly understood issues of our time. We aspire to get our own places as young adults, but fret about whether it's all right to stay that way, even if we enjoy it. We worry about friends and family members who haven't found the right match, even if they insist that they're happy on their own and will find someone in due course. We struggle to support elderly parents and grandparents who find themselves living alone after losing a spouse, and we are puzzled about what to do if they tell us they prefer to remain home alone.

In all of these situations, living alone is something that each person or family experiences as the most private of matters, when in fact it is an increasingly common condition and deserves to be treated as a subject of great public significance. Unfortunately, on those rare occasions when there is a public debate about the rise of living alone, commentators tend to present it as an unmitigated social problem, a sign of narcissism, fragmentation, and a diminished public life. Our morally charged conversations tend to frame the question of why so many people now live on their own around the false and misleading choice between the romanticized ideal of *Father Knows Best* and the glamorous enticements of *Sex and the City*. In fact, as we'll see, the reality of this great social experiment in living alone is far more interesting—and far less isolating—than these conversations would have us believe.

The rise of living alone has been a transformative social experience. It changes the way we understand ourselves and our most intimate relationships. It shapes the way we build our cities and develop our economies. It alters the way we become adults, as well as how we age and the way we die. It touches every social group and nearly every family, no matter who we are or whether we live with others today.

. . .

THIS "WE" IS MORE EXPANSIVE than you might imagine. It's tempting to treat the soaring rates of living alone as a peculiar American condition, an expression of what the literary critic Harold Bloom called the nation's "religion of self-reliance." After all, Americans have long taken pride in self-sufficiency. Thomas Jefferson called individualism "the great watchword of American life," and the historian David Potter wrote that Americans view it as a "sacred term." In *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his coauthors distinguish between two traditions of American individualism. "Utilitarian individualism," best exemplified by Benjamin Franklin, is based on the belief that society flourishes when each person pursues his or her interests first; this notion has inspired America's libertarian streak. "Expressive individualism," as exemplified by Walt Whitman, advocates cultivating and "celebrating" the self (as the poet put it in the first line of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*). This view has inspired America's ongoing search for identity and meaning. Though these two strains of individualism promote different values and agendas, together they offer Americans a well of cultural resources for putting the self before society. We draw from them often.

Consider Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of America's first public intellectuals. In his powerful essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson warned that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," and he offered advice for those seeking relief: "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world."¹² Emerson's neighbor Henry David Thoreau made the case for self-reliance in more dramatic fashion, moving into a cabin he built near Walden Pond. "It is as solitary where I live as on the prairies," he wrote. "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world

all to myself." Thoreau insisted that there was no loneliness in such a setting: "There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still . . . I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once . . . when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant . . ." Until, in an instant: "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature . . . as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since."

The wisdom of Emerson and Thoreau has inspired generations of American individualists to chart their own paths out of society. Lone rangers on the Western frontier. Cloaked detectives in the shadowy urban streets. Adventurers going "into the wild" to discover themselves. All are icons of American popular culture, symbols of our romantic fantasy of an unfettered self. So it would be easy to conclude that the contemporary urban singleton is just the latest variation on this theme.

It just wouldn't be right.

Americans have never fully embraced individualism, and we remain deeply skeptical of its excesses. De Tocqueville found here both a creeping individualism "which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends" and an abiding moral code that binds citizens to each other in civic organizations and associations of all kinds. Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau espoused the virtues of solitude. But the escape, for them, always preceded a return to society, and the insights borne of solitude were meant to promote the common good.¹³

In fact, reports of the transcendentalists' individualism have been greatly exaggerated. Most of the leading figures in that movement—Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody,

and Margaret Fuller—were deeply engaged in civic and political life. Thoreau was hardly alone, or self-sufficient, during the two years (from 1845 to 1847) he spent on and off at Walden Pond. His cabin, as modern visitors know, sat on land owned by Emerson and was less than two miles from Concord. Thoreau could walk to town in less than thirty minutes, and he returned often to see family and friends, sometimes spending hours downing drinks in the local pub. The human traffic went in two directions. Thoreau was happy to receive visitors, particularly his mother, who came frequently to deliver home-cooked meals.¹⁴

Who could blame her? Anxiety about the fate of people who live alone, particularly family or close friends, has always shadowed America's interest in self-reliance. In the early colonial towns of New England, local authorities prohibited young men from living independently, lest they use this liberty for licentious pursuits. And as the historian David Potter noted, "In our literature, any story of the complete isolation, either physical or psychological, of a man from his fellowman, such as the story of Robinson Crusoe before he found a human footprint on the beach, is regarded as essentially a horror story."¹⁵

So, too, are reports that document the decline of American "communities"—another of our sacred terms. The titles of the most popular sociology books in U.S. history—*The Lonely Crowd*, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, *The Fall of Public Man*, *The Culture of Narcissism*, and *Habits of the Heart*—raise the specter of individualism run amok. As does one of the most influential works of recent scholarship: Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which argues that many of our contemporary problems—poor health, failing schools, distrust, even unhappiness—result from the collapse of community life.¹⁶ Americans are attracted to arguments like these precisely because we remain, at heart, a "nation of joiners," just as we were when De Tocqueville visited nearly two centuries ago.

American culture is not the driving force behind the incredible rise in living alone.

IF YOU'RE NOT PERSUADED, consider another piece of evidence: Today Americans are actually *less* likely to live alone than are residents of many other nations, including those we generally regard as more communal. The four countries with the highest rates of living alone are Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, where roughly 40 to 45 percent of all households have just one person. By investing in each other's social welfare and affirming their bonds of mutual support, the Scandinavians have freed themselves to be on their own.

They have good company. In Japan, where social life has historically been organized around the family, about 30 percent of all households now have a single dweller, and the rate is far higher in urban areas. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom have famously different cultural traditions, but they share a greater proportion of one-person households than the United States. Same for Australia and Canada. And the nations with the fastest growth in one-person households? China, India, and Brazil.¹⁷ According to the market research firm Euromonitor International, at the global level the number of people living alone is skyrocketing, having risen from about 153 million in 1996 to 202 million in 2006—a 33 percent increase in a single decade.¹⁸

So what *is* driving the widespread rise in living alone? Unquestionably, both the wealth generated by economic development and the social security provided by modern welfare states have enabled the spike. Put simply, one reason that more people live alone than ever before is that today more people can afford to do so. Yet there are a great many things that we can afford to do but choose not to, which means the

economic explanation is just one piece of the puzzle. We cannot understand why so many people in so many places are now living alone unless we address a difficult question: Of all the ways that the relatively privileged citizens of the most developed nations could use their unprecedented affluence and security, why are they using them to separate from each other?

IN ADDITION TO ECONOMIC PROSPERITY and social security, the extraordinary rise in living alone stems from the world-historic cultural change that Émile Durkheim, a founding figure of sociology, called “the cult of the individual.” According to Durkheim, the cult of the individual grew out of the transition from traditional rural communities to modern industrial cities, where the individual was gradually becoming the “object of a sort of religion,” more sacred than the group. A Frenchman who wrote his major works in the late nineteenth century, Durkheim did not envision the radical economic individualism later endorsed by figures such as Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, or Margaret Thatcher (who famously declared, “There is no such thing as society”), nor did he share their conviction that liberating individuals from the state was the most effective way to generate wealth and advance the common good. But he wasn't entirely pessimistic, either. Durkheim argued that the modern division of labor would bind citizens organically. After all, individuals could achieve “independence” and “liberty” only if they were supported by the key modern social institutions—the family, the economy, and the state—which meant they had a clear self-interest in joining together to promote the common good.

The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter didn't think individuals would see things this way. In his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism, and*

Democracy, Schumpeter observed that modern capitalism promoted “the rationalization of everything in life,” and predicted that a cold, calculating culture would ultimately lead to the “decomposition” of the collective. “As soon as men and women learn the utilitarian lesson and refuse to take for granted the traditional arrangements that their social environment makes for them, as soon as they acquire the habit of weighing the individual advantages and disadvantages of any prospective course of action . . . they cannot fail to become aware of the heavy personal sacrifices that family ties and especially parenthood entail . . .” Schumpeter predicted the gradual “disintegration of the bourgeois family” form, because free-thinking men and women would opt for lives “of comfort, of freedom from care, and opportunity to enjoy alternatives of increasing attractiveness and variety.”¹⁹

The transition would take some time, though, since the cult of individualism still had to contend with deep cultural attachments to commitment. For most of the twentieth century, even the most modern societies expected individuals to marry and judged them harshly if they “failed” to do so. Schumpeter may well have seen singles as rational, but in a survey of Americans conducted in 1957, more than half the respondents said that unmarried people were “sick,” “immoral,” or “neurotic,” while about a third viewed them “neutrally.” These positions did not hold. By 1976, a generation later, only one-third of Americans acknowledged that they had negative views about the unmarried, while half were neutral and one in seven actually approved. Today, with single adults outnumbering married ones, pollsters don’t even bother asking whether Americans approve of being unmarried. Though the stigma of living alone is not entirely gone, there’s no question that our cultural attitudes about singlehood and family life have changed.²⁰

According to contemporary wisdom, the search for success and happiness depends less on tying oneself down to another than on open-

ing up the world of possibilities so that one can always pursue the best option. Freedom. Flexibility. Personal choice. These rank among our most cherished modern virtues. Today, writes the demographer Andrew Cherlin, “one’s primary obligation is to oneself rather than to one’s partner and children,” which means the contemporary cult of the individual has intensified far beyond what Durkheim had envisioned.²¹

Not long ago, someone who was dissatisfied with his or her spouse and wanted a divorce had to justify that decision. Today it’s the opposite: If you’re not fulfilled by your marriage, you have to justify staying in it, because of the tremendous cultural pressure to be good to one’s self.

Our commitment to places is even weaker. We move so often that some sociologists call modern neighborhoods “communities of limited liability,” places where people make connections without expecting those links to be deep or lasting.²² The same is true in the workplace, where employers no longer reward productive employees with career-long positions, and we all know that being self-regarding, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial is the only way to stay afloat. “For the first time in history,” write the German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, “the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction.”²³ Everything revolves around it.

THE CULT OF THE INDIVIDUAL SPREAD gradually across the Western world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it made its deepest impressions on modern societies in the West and beyond only in the second half of the twentieth century, when four other sweeping social changes—the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution—created conditions in which the individual could flourish.

Begin with the rising status of women, whose advances range from gains in education and massive incorporation into the paid labor force to the right to control their domestic, sexual, and reproductive lives. Consider, for instance, that in 1950 there were more than two men for every woman on American college campuses, whereas today women make up the majority of undergraduate students as well as of those who earn a bachelor's degree.²⁴ Or the fact that, between 1950 and 2000, the number of working women counted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics rose from 18 million to 66 million while the proportion of women working jumped from 33 percent to 60 percent.²⁵ Most other advanced nations have experienced similar changes during the past half century, such that today the level of men's and women's participation in higher education and the paid workforce is more balanced than ever before.

Women's assertion of control over their own bodies has also changed the terms of modern relationships, resulting in delayed marriage, a longer transition to adulthood, and increased rates of separation and divorce. In the United States, divorce rates have climbed steadily since the mid-nineteenth century, but in the 1960s they began to rise sharply, and by 2000 marriages were twice as likely to end in divorce as they were in 1950.²⁶ Today, neither breaking up with a spouse nor staying single means settling for a life of unwanted abstinence. Rather than settling down, great numbers of young adults indulge in the opportunities afforded by easy access to contraception and freedom from family supervision. The Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld argues that middle-class people in their twenties and thirties now look forward to a "second adolescence" in which they seek out new experiences—from serial dating to interracial and same-sex relationships—and refrain from commitment unless they find their "true romantic love." The new permissiveness around sexual experimentation is an important feature

of what Rosenfeld calls our "age of independence." Living alone gives us time and space to discover the pleasures of being with others.²⁷

The second driving force behind the cult of the individual is the communications revolution, which has allowed people throughout the world to experience the pleasures of social life—not to mention vast amounts of entertainment—even when they're home alone. The telephone, for instance, is the most common device that we use to stay connected. Home phone service in the United States first became available during the late nineteenth century, yet most Americans were either unwilling or unable to get it. In 1940, only one in three American households had phone service, but demand surged after World War II, with household penetration reaching 62 percent by 1950 and roughly 95 percent today.²⁸ The television penetrated into American households far more rapidly. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam reports that between 1948, when the device came on the market, and 1959, home ownership rates for TV went from 1 percent to 90 percent, a pace unmatched by any other major communications technology, including the radio, the VCR, the personal computer, and the mobile phone. Over the past decade, the Internet has further transformed our communications, combining the more active, interpersonal features of the telephone with the more passive, mass communications features of the television. Individual users can not only communicate instantly, at all hours, with friends and strangers, they can also express themselves to a potentially unlimited audience via a blog, a homemade video posted on YouTube, or a social networking site. For those who want to live alone, the Internet affords rich new ways to stay connected.

In the modern world, most people who live alone have another way to connect with each other: simply leaving their home and participating in their city's robust social life. Mass urbanization is the third en-

abling condition for the rise of the singleton society, in part because it has led to a booming subculture of singles who share similar values, orientations, and ways of life.

Subcultures thrive in cities, which tend to attract nonconformists who are able to find others like themselves in the dense variety of urban life. (That's why we tend to associate subcultures with particular places, from the bohemians of Greenwich Village to the surfers of Manhattan Beach.) When a subculture gets established and becomes visible, it can grow enough to influence or even transform the culture at large. The historian Howard Chudacoff argues that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, single men in cities such as Chicago and New York created a new collective lifestyle built around drinking clubs, civic associations, apartment houses, and relatively liberal sexual mores. By the late twentieth century, what was once a distinctive bachelor subculture was such a big part of urban culture in general that the concept lost its salience. Singles, including those who lived alone, didn't have to confine themselves to particular buildings, clubs, neighborhoods, or cities. A growing number of places—gyms, coffee shops, clubs, residential complexes—and services—cleaning, food preparation, home delivery—were being developed with their needs and interests in mind. With some notable exceptions, they could find people who understood their experiences and shared their concerns just about anywhere. Together, as Ethan Watters argues in *Urban Tribes*, they could help each other live alone.²⁹

The fourth change that has amplified the cult of the individual is also a collective achievement, but it is rarely experienced that way. Because people are living longer than ever before—or, more specifically, because women often outlive their spouses by decades, rather than years—aging alone has become an increasingly common experience. In 1900, about 10 percent of the widowed elderly in the United States lived alone; by 2000, 62 percent did.³⁰ Today it's not unusual for

women to spend a quarter or a third of their lives in a place of their own, and men are spending a greater share of their adult years living alone, too.

Aging alone is not easy. The ordinary challenges of growing old—adjusting to retirement, managing illnesses, enduring frailty, watching friends and family die—can become extraordinary hardships for someone who spends most of the time alone. Yet it is not always miserable, either. A survey in England, for instance, found that old people who lived alone had higher life satisfaction, more contact with service providers, and no more cognitive or physical impairments than those who lived with others. And according to a recent review of the literature on aging, studies of the entire elderly population have found that “those living alone are healthier than those living with adults other than a spouse, or even, in some cases, than those living with a spouse.”³¹ Indeed, in recent decades old people have demonstrated a clear preference for living alone rather than moving in with family or friends or to an institutional home.³² This, again, is not merely an American phenomenon. From Japan to Germany, Italy to Australia, aging alone has become common, even among ethnic groups that have long exhibited a clear preference for keeping multigenerational homes.³³ Today few people believe that aging alone is an ideal outcome, but most of those who are single as they get older do everything possible to maintain a place of their own.

The question is why. Or more precisely: Why do so many of us find living alone so much more appealing than other available options? Why has it become so common in the world's most affluent societies? What makes it so compelling for the young, the middle-aged, and the old?

We have embarked on this massive social experiment in living alone because we believe it serves a purpose. Living alone helps us pursue sacred modern values—individual freedom, personal control,

and self-realization—whose significance endures from adolescence to our final days. It allows us to do what we want, when we want, on our own terms. It liberates us from the constraints of a domestic partner's needs and demands, and permits us to focus on ourselves. Today, in our age of digital media and ever expanding social networks, living alone can offer even greater benefits: the time and space for restorative solitude. This means that living alone helps us discover who we are, as well as what gives us meaning and purpose.

Paradoxically, living alone might be exactly what we need to reconnect. After all, for most people living alone is a cyclical condition, not a permanent one. Many, though by no means all, of those who live alone ultimately decide they want the intimacy of a domestic partner, whether a lover, family member, or friend. But they, too, know that today none of our arrangements are binding or permanent. We are unmoored from tradition yet uncertain how to remake our lives, and in contemporary societies it has become increasingly common for people to move through different experiences—single, solo, married, separated, partnered, and back—while anchored only by the self.

This means that each person who lives alone is subjected to extraordinary pressures, and at times it can be hard to stave off self-doubt about whether one is living the way one should. But it doesn't mean that those who live alone are condemned to feel lonely or be isolated. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that people who live alone compensate by becoming more socially active than those who live with others, and that cities with high numbers of singletons enjoy a thriving public culture.³⁴

CONCLUSION

ANXIETY ABOUT BEING DISCONNECTED is an age-old condition. It's in Genesis, when God, concerned about the potential power of a unified human community, "confounds" the language shared among residents in the Tower of Babel, leaving them unable to communicate or understand each other. It's in Plato's *Symposium*, when Aristophanes explains that Zeus, who also feared the power of a united human species, split us in half. Before then, the story goes, every person had four arms, four legs, and a two-sided face, with integrated male and female qualities. Now each of us is an incomplete individual, condemned to feel alone unless we find the companion who makes us whole.

Concerns about various forms of alienation and social fragmentation are also hallmarks of modern culture, as are debates on why we wound up this way and how we might come together again. In fact, inquiries into these very issues helped inspire the first major works of social science, including canonical works in economics, psychology, political science, and sociology, by big thinkers as diverse as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud.

Contemporary social scientists have taken the study of human dis-

connection in new directions. Instead of grand philosophical theories, today's number-crunching academics traffic in surveys, using powerful statistics to convey who we are and what troubles us now. In recent years, blockbuster findings about our purportedly heightened social isolation have sent commentators into a new cycle of anxiety-laden debates about the reasons we've become so atomized. Some, such as the startling discovery that one in four Americans has no one with whom they can discuss important matters, turn out to be unfounded. Others, like those documenting the number of hours we spend in front of screens rather than in face-to-face interaction, seem to discount the social nature of what we do online. But if we often exaggerate the extent of our disconnection, there is no mistaking the fact that today more people throughout the world live alone than ever before, and that even more will likely join them when they are affluent and secure enough to pull it off.

The meaning of these facts can be debated, however, and making sense of them requires looking beyond the numbers. The cultural critics and political officials who worry about the rise of living alone don't acknowledge that living alone is an individual choice that's as valid as the choice to get married or live with a domestic partner. Nor do they recognize that it's a collective achievement—which is why it's common in developed nations but not in poor ones. They tend to overlook the fact that neither individuals nor societies see living alone as a goal or an end point—which is why social movements to promote the interests of singletons are so difficult to organize. And they don't admit that living alone has *not* led to the “decomposition” of collective life and the end of meaningful social commitments, as the economist Joseph Schumpeter and many others feared.

More pragmatically, those who caution against the shift toward living alone need to grapple with the fact that the social changes driving

it—the emergence of the individual, the rising status of women, the growth of cities, the development of communications technologies, and the expansion of the life course—are unlikely to be reversed. At this point in history it's clear that living alone will be an enduring feature of the contemporary developed world. States and societies that recognize this, and particularly those that give singletons the kinds of support that they now offer to those who are married, will be better able to meet their citizens' needs.

CONSIDER SWEDEN, where about 47 percent of all households have just one resident (compared to about 28 percent in the United States), or more specifically Stockholm, where a staggering 60 percent of all dwellings are occupied by someone who lives alone. Like the United States, Sweden has a deep-seated cultural legacy of individualism and self-reliance. But it's the nation's ongoing commitment to collectivism, not its problems with atomization or social isolation, that most impressed me when I traveled there to learn about how and why so many Swedes live alone today.¹

For decades, scholars of the modern world—and of the family in particular—have turned to Sweden for a preview of trends (the bad as well as the good) that may emerge in their own societies. In the 1980s, the American sociologist and marriage proponent David Popenoe noted that Sweden had made a “world-leading move away from the nuclear family.” Popenoe highlighted the fact that Swedish marriage rates were down and nonmarital cohabitation was up, as well as the fact that family dissolution, whether from divorce or nonmarital separation, happened more frequently than before. But he also called attention to another surprising social change: that the number of one-person households had more than doubled between 1960 and 1980, with young

adults leading the way. Popenoe questioned what would happen when the once universal human experience of living in groups was no longer assured. He worried about whether the rise of living alone would change the quality and character of social relationships, resulting in more loneliness or anomie. But he also acknowledged that this seemed unlikely: "It is not that Swedes are misanthropes, living their adult lives with no intimates. The evidence suggests that the propensity of adult Swedes to form a dyad with another person, at least for part of their lives, is as strong if not stronger than elsewhere . . . Nor is it that Swedes necessarily lack intimate social contacts, even if many of these contacts are outside of their immediate household."²

The intensity of Swedish social life is most evident in Stockholm, a prosperous city that is also the global capital of living alone. I arrived there during a damp and cloudy week in the fall of 2010, but the weather did nothing to diminish the vitality of the city's sidewalks, waterways, parks, restaurants, and cafés. More remarkable than the crowds of people, though, was the density of the city's handsome, functional residential buildings, including prewar complexes designed specifically to promote communal living among singletons and postwar high-rises that, if not especially attractive, created an abundant supply of decent places to live.

These buildings were not developed by commercial realty companies for which success is measured solely by revenues. They were designed to meet the needs of quite specific populations, including the ranks of those who live alone. In the 1930s, for instance, a group of modern architects, social planners, and feminists conceived a new style of collective housing, one that offered single women (young and old) a private residence within a building that also supplied services such as cooking, cleaning, and child care. The "collective house," designed by

architect Sven Markelius and social welfare champion Alva Myrdal (who won the 1982 Nobel Peace Prize), opened its doors to single women and single mothers in 1935. Located in central Stockholm's Kungsholmen district, the building contained a restaurant (with a small elevator system that could deliver meals into every unit), a communal kitchen, a laundry (with chutes for sending down dirty clothing and a paid staff of launderers), and a nursery. It was a resounding success, perhaps too much so, because demand for a place there has always exceeded the modest supply of fifty-seven units (eighteen with one room, thirty-five with two rooms, and four four-room "mansionettes"). Fortunately, there are several similar buildings in the same neighborhood, some catering to single mothers, others to all singletons regardless of sex or age. And while in some the services are no longer available, the restaurant and pastry shop in the Markelius and Myrdal collective house remain extremely popular. After I sampled the fare there, the outgoing staff delighted in showing me that the meal delivery elevator still works.

Between 1965 and 1974, Sweden embarked on a far more ambitious housing project: the Miljonprogrammet, or Million Program. At the direction of the Social Democratic Party, the government invested in the construction of roughly one million new residential units (and the demolition of about 350,000 others), including high-rise apartment complexes, many of which were packed together in inner suburbs, as well as less conspicuous, small-scale developments scattered throughout the city. The Social Democrats initiated the program because Swedish cities lacked sufficient housing for the continuous stream of migrants who had abandoned their rural and small-town communities in the previous two decades. Social planners believed that the massive construction project would assure Sweden its role as an ultra-

modern nation, a place where citizens would benefit from their nation's collective prosperity and the privileges it afforded.³ Thereafter, one of those privileges would be the chance to live alone.

The abundance of small apartments available in cities like Stockholm is just one reason that going solo is so pervasive. Like the other Scandinavian nations, all of which have unusually high rates of people who live alone, Sweden has both a dynamic market economy and a strong welfare state, and citizens can pursue their autonomy with confidence that the safety net will catch them if they fall. "Do you know why so many of us live alone?" a Swedish statistician I interview in the charming Old Town district asks me. He quickly answers his own question: "Because we can."

For middle-class Swedes who came of age after the Million Program, moving into a place of their own after leaving their childhood home has become a rite of passage into adulthood, a luxury that sometimes feels like a social right. Until recently, when the government changed the system for allocating apartments, parents would register their newborn children on the waiting list for a small apartment (in the same way that Manhattan parents sign up their infants for nursery schools), to assure that there would be one available when they graduated from gymnasium (high school). What's more, Swedish parents will often exchange their own family-size apartments for a smaller, "empty-nest" unit so that they can help pay for their child's first go at domestic autonomy. "It's our responsibility," the father of a teenager who's approaching graduation tells me. "And we're trying to figure out how to make it work."

During my visit to Stockholm I interviewed a dozen middle-class men and women between the ages of twenty-nine and forty-seven. It was by no means a large or random or remotely scientific sample, but I was still impressed and surprised by what I learned from them. Not

only had every single one of them begun living alone in their late teens or early twenties, but nearly all of their friends and family members had, too. Under these conditions, going solo is a tremendously social experience. "I got my first apartment when I turned twenty," a forty-three-year-old man in Stockholm recounts, "and so did just about all of my friends. That was one of the best times of my life. Most nights we'd meet up at someone's apartment and drink for a while, because we didn't have enough money for more than one drink in a bar, then go out somewhere to meet women and other friends." A thirty-year-old woman who's studying anthropology reports a similar experience. "We all kept our own places, even when we were dating someone seriously and spending a lot of nights together. It's only recently, now that we're all turning thirty and moving in with partners, that my friends are starting to sell or give up their apartments. But even that's hard, because so many of the people who are just a little older than us have already divorced or separated. And we all want a place that's ours."

Just as Swedish social planners like Alva Myrdal built special housing complexes for female singletons in the 1930s, contemporary planners are designing new collective dwellings for the growing ranks of young people, divorcés and divorcées, and seniors who live alone. In Stockholm, I spent one afternoon with Ingela Lindh, the CEO of Stockholmshem, which manages more than 25,000 residential units from the city's public housing stock, and her colleague Björn Ljung, who is also a liberal (of the free-market variety) representative in the municipal government. (He is a distinctively Swedish free-market liberal, though, which means he says things such as "We pay a lot of taxes and we think that's a good thing, because it allows us to take care of each other.")⁴ Lindh is petite but has a commanding presence, which she honed during her ten years' tenure as Stockholm's chief urban planner. Since taking over Stockholmshem, she has pledged to develop

more housing for young adults and students, as well as for the growing number of elderly Swedes who have aged in place but now seek a more communal way to live alone. "Housing has gotten too expensive here in the past decade," Lindh tells me. "Stockholm residents used to spend a quarter or a third of their income on their apartment. Now people who are getting into the market are paying 40 or 45 percent, and a lot of young and old people won't be able to afford it unless we do something."

As we sit around her conference table, Lindh and Ljung show off the architectural plans for a number of projects, including an office tower they've converted into an apartment building full of "starter" units for young singles. "We want to make sure that young people have the chance to get their own apartment," Lindh says. "Because if they have that experience, they'll have a fuller life, a more social life, and they'll develop closer connections to friends." Sweden's Social Democrats, who until recently controlled the national government as well as many municipal ones, took the same position in a report issued before the 2010 elections. The party called for the immediate construction of 50,000 units of housing, including 3,000 apartments for students and 11,000 one- and two-room apartments for young adults. The housing shortage, it claimed, is "a serious problem for young people who are prevented from moving away from home, and for students who are not infrequently forced to abstain from studying in the Stockholm region."⁵

Stockholm's municipal government has also acknowledged that it lacks enough housing for the poor and the sick, as well as for the rising population of immigrants and refugees. Stockholmshem is trying to build some. Lindh and Ljung pull out the design for the Swedish equivalent of an SRO, as well as a complex designed and located to allow the children of Somali refugees to move into their own places without leaving their family's neighborhood. "It's not a very Swedish idea, because

it treats the Somalis as if they are different from all others. And at first we didn't like it," Lindh acknowledges. "But when they explained how important it was for the families to be connected, I understood that it was the right thing to do."

Lindh seems most excited about a building that she doesn't manage: Färdknäppen, a community-owned facility for Stockholm residents who are above age forty, with no children living at home, and an interest in being alone together during the second half of their lives. "You can move into Färdknäppen when your needs are no longer dictated by family and children," the building's Web site explains. "How much social contact and 'togetherness' one desires varies, from person to person and from one period to another."⁶ "It's important that someone can move in at forty, not sixty-five," Lindh adds, "because that means there's real age diversity, with middle-age adults who work full-time as well as retired people. You can see how different it is from a retirement home the moment you walk in." I tell her I'd like to see it sometime, perhaps on another visit. "How about now?" she asks me. "We can visit my mother, who's lived there for fifteen years."

A few minutes later we're in a taxi heading to Stockholm's Södermalm district, a leafy, densely populated area where Färdknäppen, with seven floors and forty-three residential units, blends in neatly. The building, which was designed in 1989, is clean and modern, with large windows, a brick exterior at street level, and white walls with red trim above. The ground floor is spacious and inviting. Lindh's mother, Siv, who's lively at eighty-five, greets us at the front door and offers me a tour. We begin in the bright dining room, with seating for sixty people, where on most nights the majority of the residents eat together (for about four dollars), next to the large, open kitchen where four people are busily preparing dinner. There's also a library and television room, a computer room, a laundry room, a weaving area, a carpentry

and hobby room, and an entry to the communal garden and outdoor seating area. We take the elevator to the top floor, where there's a roof deck and a party room; then we descend to the basement, which features an exercise room large enough for group classes as well as a sauna, before we head up to a residential floor, where a group photograph of the floor's residents hangs prominently in the hall. Siv lives in an airy corner unit, with a bedroom, a living room, and a compact kitchen. "I have enough space to cook for myself," she tells me. "But usually I eat downstairs in the dining room and spend an hour or so after dinner talking with friends. Of course I don't have to, which is what makes being here so nice."

Residents of Färdknäppen are obligated to participate in some activities, however. Every six weeks each resident must help with the cooking and cleaning. "This doesn't mean, though, that everyone must be a good cook or that everyone must do exactly as much as everyone else," the building's Web site explains. "'From each according to their ability' as it's stated in the rules of the association." Occasionally, residents may experience these tasks as onerous, but there's little question about whether they detract from or enhance the appeal of the place. Today there is a long waiting list of Stockholm singles who are eager for a spot in the building. "We obviously need a lot more places like this," Lindh tells me. "It's a great model for bringing people who live alone into a real community. Now the question is whether it can be replicated on a bigger scale, because more and more of us are going to want what it offers."

Lindh, who's divorced, has two children, and as they reach the age where they expect to move into their own apartments, she is thinking more about what kind of arrangement will suit her best. "They will both be out of my apartment soon," she explains. "But I've realized that the way we live is never permanent. Sometimes we're with a partner,

sometimes with children, sometimes alone. In Sweden we know that the family is always changing, and so are our own lives. We're not especially lonely—not at all. We're actually quite social, and we've learned how to be okay when we're on our own."

IN SWEDEN, as in many other nations where singletons are now ubiquitous, living alone is not merely a condition to be okay with. It's an arrangement that people have come to appreciate, value, and even pursue. Young people believe that moving into a home of their own is essential for becoming an adult, because the experience will help them grow more mature and self-reliant. Middle-age adults believe that living alone is important after a divorce or separation, because it helps them regain their autonomy and self-control. The elderly believe that living alone allows them to maintain their dignity, integrity, and autonomy, and to determine how they will live.

One reason that so many find living alone appealing is that the choice is hardly binding. Most people could find roommates, from strangers on Craigslist to friends, family, prospective romantic partners, or coresidents in a group-living facility. But the fact is, most of us prefer living alone to these other options, and—since we've all been shaped by the cult of the individual—we're unlikely to change our minds.

What if, instead of indulging the social reformer's fantasy that we would all just be better off together, we accepted the fact that living alone is a fundamental feature of modern societies and we simply did more to shield those who go solo from the main hazards of the condition? Isolation and insufficient care for frail, old, or impoverished singletons. Disconnection for those who want to participate in social activities but have lost their companions and don't know how or where to find others. Stress and anxiety for single women who want a child

but are nearing the limits of their reproductive years. Economic insecurity for those who lose a job and have no partner to support them. These are practical problems for which there are good solutions, not causes for vague and fuzzy proclamations—the death of community! the collapse of civil society!—which are notoriously difficult to assess.

One reason that singletons are so prevalent in the Scandinavian countries is that their welfare states protect most citizens from the most difficult aspects of living alone. Consider one of the issues that makes going solo so much more stressful for young women than it is for young men: planning one's life around the biological clock. In my interviews, American women in their late thirties and early forties consistently reported that their anxieties around reproduction led them to wonder whether they had made good decisions about their personal and professional lives. They tear themselves up asking questions that few young American men who live alone ponder: Should they have settled, or settled down, earlier? Would they have been happier if they had lowered their professional ambitions and invested more time in their personal lives? Young Swedish women who live alone share some of these anxieties, but for them finding the right partner feels less urgent or consequential, because they know that if they have a child on their own they are entitled to meaningful support: sixteen months of paid parental leave, with costs shared by employers and the state; heavily subsidized child care, for which no family can pay more than 1 to 3 percent of their income; and public health care that ranks among the finest in the world.

It is, of course, unlikely that the United States would adopt such generous social policies in the foreseeable future, and perhaps it is folly to suggest that we emulate them now that nations throughout the developed world are trimming down their welfare programs. But it's im-

portant to note that the social rights of citizenship in places like Sweden dramatically improve life for all young women and provide even more benefits for those who live alone. It's also important to identify the costs of relying on the market to satisfy the needs of individuals and societies in which so many people live alone. One of these costs is the problem of overwork among aspiring young professionals whose security hinges on their professional achievements and who often end up "married" to their job. Another, as we have seen, is that the private sector, whose innovations enhance and even enable the lives of successful singletons—consider smart phones, solo vacation packages, prepackaged meals, and luxury condominium complexes, among others—has done far less to help the sick, the poor, and the elderly, all of whom need the kinds of support that even "socially responsible" corporations are unlikely to provide.

What should societies adapting to the emergence of singletons ask of the private and public sectors? To what extent could our policies promote or demand genuine social responsibility for those who live alone? Citizens and political leaders in the United States have asked these kinds of questions during previous historical moments when they faced up to the challenges posed by major demographic changes. Think of the post-World War II baby boom, when public support for suburban home development and highway construction to accommodate the growing population of middle-class families reshaped the urban landscape. Or the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when progressive reformers invested in municipal services and public health agencies in response to the wave of immigrants who had settled in centralized cities. The extraordinary rise of living alone is a less publicly visible but equally dramatic transformation, and it will be impossible to manage it well without bold policy initiatives. In the United

States, we've discussed "settling" as if it is exclusively a personal matter concerning our choice of a partner. In fact it is also a political issue, concerning what we expect from our public and private institutions, today and in the future.

The question of what we expect from the state and society extends to the domain of housing, and our answer will affect the future of all of us who might live alone someday. There's little question that residential environments that are better designed for singleton societies could greatly reduce the most serious risks related to going solo. People who live alone do not need as much interior space as nuclear families. As Alva Myrdal recognized in the 1930s, young adults as well as the elderly are often willing to live in relatively small but functional apartments if they are located in buildings with well-designed public spaces and common facilities for eating, socializing, exercising, and the like. And when people choose to live in these places, they increase the available supply of family-size housing, bringing down the price for those who could use some extra room.

There are some buildings that are laid out this way in contemporary America, particularly high-end condominium developments for urban professionals and assisted living facilities for retirees. But these tend to be exclusive enclaves for the nation's most affluent people, inaccessible to those who would benefit most from the social integration and high-quality services they offer. These places so thoroughly segregate—especially by age and by class—that they impoverish the experience of those fortunate enough to inhabit them. Better architectural designs for today's singleton societies are therefore necessary but not sufficient. We also need new models for integrating people of different life stages and social positions. And of course we need more buildings, too.

This is the insight that helped Rosanne Haggerty and Common Ground develop SROs that are more successful than any others in

New York City. Their best projects are not merely well crafted, with the kinds of handsome public spaces we associate with opulent hotels and prewar apartment buildings, they are also centrally located, professionally managed, and exceptionally diverse. The Times Square, for instance, houses struggling young actors and professionals as well as the retired elderly, the unemployed, and those who are coping with illness and substance abuse. It offers high-quality services for those who need them, and encourages those who don't to lend a hand when they can. It's not for everyone. But it's far more attractive than the other alternatives for people who live alone and need low-cost housing in New York City.

Supportive housing facilities like those built by Common Ground are cost-effective and, as a number of scientific studies have shown, cost-saving ways to help people who are on their own and in trouble; they can even produce benefits for the communities in which they are located. Consider findings published in two top medical journals, *Psychiatric Services* and *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*. One article, an analysis of homeless single adults with psychiatric and substance abuse disorders in San Francisco, reports, "Providing permanent supportive housing . . . reduced their use of costly hospital emergency department and inpatient services, which are publicly provided." A second, which tracks chronically homeless singles with severe alcohol problems in Seattle, reports that those who were placed in a supportive housing complex—one that allows residents to drink in their rooms and offers a range of voluntary services—cut their consumption of alcohol, their encounters with the criminal justice system, and their use of expensive health services. The authors, researchers at the University of Washington, conclude that the savings from these changes—specifically, the reduction in overnight visits to hospitals, mental health and substance abuse clinics, jails, and shelters—more

than offset the costs of the housing program: "At twelve months, the ninety-five housed individuals had reduced their total medical costs by more than \$4 million, compared with the year prior to enrollment, or \$42,964 per person per year, as compared with a cost of \$13,440 per person per year to administer the housing program."⁷

Surprisingly, these facilities can also contribute to local economic development. A study of supportive housing in New York City by NYU's Furman Center for the Study of Real Estate and Urban Policy reports that properties within five hundred feet of a facility "show steady growth relative to other properties in the neighborhood in the years after supportive housing opens," while those between five hundred and a thousand feet away decline initially "but then increase steadily, perhaps as the market realizes that fears about the supportive housing turned out to be wrong."⁸

Supportive housing for solidly middle-class people produces a different set of benefits. Recall Stockholm's *Färdknäppen*, which integrates people of different ages and life stages, and the city's historic collective houses made for singletons living *en masse*. Alas, these kinds of facilities are even more uncommon than supportive housing programs for the formerly homeless. Even in Sweden, the supply of cooperative housing like *Färdknäppen* is not nearly large enough to meet the demand, and today the state housing agency lacks the budget it needs to replicate the model on a large scale. But the current economic crisis will not last forever, and when government agencies around the world regain their fiscal health they should be encouraged to develop housing that's appropriate for the way we live now. These need not be exclusively public endeavors. After the housing bubble burst, real estate developers regained some incentive to collaborate on projects for which there is both market demand and a clear social need. And all of us

have an interest in increasing the supply of housing that works for people who live alone, because whether or not we need it for ourselves, the odds are that someone we love—a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a child—will.

Of all the people who live alone, those who are old and infirm face the most difficult challenges, and finding affordable housing that connects them with sources of social support is one of them. Most elderly singletons haven't been fortunate enough to live in a naturally occurring retirement community or to have aged in a place that continues to suit their needs. Those who could use more help usually find that high-quality assisted living facilities—those providing extensive personal and social services, a communal environment, and private apartments—are prohibitively expensive. (In some states, those who are eligible for Medicare and Medicaid are guaranteed funding for a spot in an assisted living facility. Yet they are typically given a bed in a shared room of a lower-quality institution, and they are not assured readmission if they are hospitalized or otherwise forced to leave.)⁹ It's unlikely that many viable alternatives, let alone attractive ones, will come from for-profit corporations competing in the free market. In fact, what's happened when for-profit corporations enter the nursing home business suggests that, left to their own devices, they might only make things worse.

The market's failure to provide decent care or attractive housing options for older people who live alone has generated a serious social problem. Today we live longer than any generation before us, yet none of us can be certain of whether we will age on our own or with a companion, and few of us know whether we will be financially stable or insecure (as millions of retirees who planned on living off their investments before 2008 can attest). Wouldn't everyone feel less anxious if

they knew that their loved ones would have a place where they'd be comfortable and well cared for if they wound up old and alone someday? Wouldn't we all feel more secure if we knew there were residential options for elderly seniors beyond the solitary private apartment or the lifeless nursing home?

One relatively simple way to begin addressing this problem involves increasing the public support for caregivers, including some of the 38 million Americans who provide uncompensated care to aging family members. I say simple because the U.S. Congress has already passed a bill that authorizes this very thing. The Lifespan Respite Care Act, which Congress passed in late 2006, created a modest pool of funds—about \$290 million over five years—for states that were interested in building coordinated systems of community-based services for those who take care of people with special needs. (Although the term “respite” suggests otherwise, care for old adults who live alone but are not near death is covered by the legislation.) President George W. Bush signed the bill into law in December 2006, but neither he nor Congress funded it beyond a onetime \$2.5 million appropriation. The Obama administration and the Democratic Congress reversed this decision, opting to fund it “on level” for 2010 and 2011, at \$70 million and \$95 million, respectively. The Obama administration also introduced a new, \$102 million caregiver initiative designed to “ease the burden on families with elder care responsibilities and allow seniors to live in the community for as long as possible.”¹⁰

There's no doubt that these programs will help generate better care and support for the millions of Americans who are aging alone. But there's also no doubt that they will do little or nothing for the majority of people in this situation. The problem is not only that this level of funding is woefully inadequate for addressing the American care crisis, it's also that these programs fail to address the more difficult (and ex-

pensive) problem: the shortage of housing where older people who live alone can come together and get support. Building the kinds of assisted living facilities that are now available only to the affluent elderly would require an enormous investment, and in some respects this is a terrible time to advocate for it. The economy is sluggish. The federal government faces record deficits. The cost of other benefits, for things like health and prescription drugs, is already high. But there are other reasons to believe that the timing isn't too bad. After all, building new housing is a useful way to improve our physical infrastructure and create jobs, and managing an assisted living facility will also entail putting more social service providers to work. Moreover, today the baby boomers are beginning to experience the challenges of growing old, and millions of them are learning firsthand that aging alone is much easier when they have good support. If, as it's often alleged, the baby boomers are a distinctively self-interested generation, they may well use their political clout to promote housing programs that benefit them first.¹¹ But in this case they could be forgiven, maybe even appreciated, because by building better places for themselves today they'll give younger Americans better choices tomorrow. We'll need them, too, since so many of us will be living alone.

ULTIMATELY, the question is not how many of us live alone but how we live with the fact that so many people in so many societies do. It's too early to say how any particular society will respond to either the problems or the opportunities generated by this extraordinary social transformation. After all, our experiment with going solo is still in its earliest stages, and we are just beginning to understand how it affects our own lives, as well as our families, communities, cities, and states.

In theory, the rise of living alone could lead to any number of

outcomes, from the decline of community to a more socially active citizenry, from rampant isolation to a more robust public life. I began my exploration of the world's first singleton societies with an eye for their most dangerous and disturbing features, including selfishness, loneliness, reclusiveness, and the horrors of getting sick or dying alone. I found some measure of all of these things in the cities where living alone has become common, and in the pages above I've suggested several ways that we could address them more effectively than we do today. On balance, however, I came away from my fieldwork convinced that the problems related to living alone do not and should not define the condition, because the great majority of those who go solo have a more rich and varied experience. Sometimes, indeed, they feel lonely, anxious, and uncertain about whether they would be happier in another arrangement. But so, too, do those who are married or live with others, and the widespread, often firsthand knowledge of this fact is just one of the reasons that, in my interviews, nearly everyone who lives alone said that they prefer it to their other available options.

Today there is an abundance of pop sociology that associates living alone with the rise of loneliness, the collapse of civil society, and the demise of the common good. I find this line of argument to be worse than misleading. It's damaging, because its vague generalities distract us from the urgent challenge of calling attention to truly isolated people and to the places that most need help.

Moreover, when we treat living alone exclusively as a social problem, we cannot help but overlook the fact that its rapid emergence has also created new possibilities for our personal, romantic, and social lives. The rise of living alone has produced some significant social benefits, too. We have seen, for instance, that young and middle-age singletons have helped to revitalize the public life of cities, because they are

more likely than those who live with others to spend time with friends and neighbors, to frequent bars, cafés, and restaurants, and to participate in informal social activities as well as in civic groups.¹² We have seen that cultural acceptance of living alone has helped to liberate women from bad marriages and oppressive families, allowing them not only to reassert control of their personal lives but also to make a spirited return to civic life, where a world of other singletons will welcome them. We have seen that, despite fears that living alone may be environmentally unsustainable, solos tend to live in apartments rather than in big houses, and in relatively green cities rather than in auto-dependent suburbs. So there's good reason to believe that people who live alone in cities actually consume less energy than they would if they coupled up and decamped to pursue a single-family home. And we have seen that living alone has given people a way to achieve restorative solitude as well as the freedom to engage in intensely social experiences. Surprisingly, it has given people the personal time and space that we sometimes need to make deep and meaningful connections—whether with another person, a community, a cause, or our selves.

COUNTLESS CULTURAL TRADITIONS, from the Stoics to the monastics to the transcendentalists, have emphasized the value of spending time in a place of one's own. So, too, have modern social scientists, from Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist who coined the expression "cult of the individual," to John Cacioppo, the University of Chicago psychologist who, in his innovative studies of loneliness, has noted that the lack of time for oneself "is one of the great complaints of men and women in today's harried marriages" and that "those who feel lonely actually spend no more time alone than do those who feel more connected."¹³

Durkheim argued that the private time that individuals spend on their own allows them to preserve energy and build an appetite for social participation. He recognized the allure of autonomy and independence, but he had a deep and abiding faith in the fundamental human need to come together, and he insisted that individuals, once liberated, would begin searching for something that transcended themselves. The Americans Emerson and Thoreau shared a similar vision. They argued that being alone, and sometimes living alone, was necessary not because solitude grants us freedom from the burden of intimate social ties, which are, in the end, a source of deep meaning and security, but because it allows us the freedom to cultivate our selves, develop original ideas, and make a productive return to the world.

People who live in the world's busiest and most modern societies can easily forget that it's vital to learn how to be alone. But finding solitude is particularly important for those of us who spend ever more of our time online and in social media. Today "friends" are everywhere, distractions are ubiquitous, and all too often our minds are exactly where we are not. Whether online or offline, we are so immersed in social networks that, as *Connected* authors Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler put it, we have begun "to form a human superorganism." In this state, they claim, "we necessarily lose some of our individuality."¹⁴ This is precisely the kind of loss that would have worried the philosophers Emerson and Thoreau, the sociologists Durkheim and Simmel, or the psychologist Anthony Storr, each of whom, in his own distinctive way, viewed individuality as sacred because it enhances collective life.

Living alone is by no means the only way to reassert our individuality or to discover how and where and on what terms we want to engage the world. But an unprecedented number of people in our hypernetworked, ultra-active, 24/7 culture have discovered that, instead

of leading to loneliness or isolation, having a place of one's own gives us time and space for a productive retreat. Solitude, once we learn how to use it, does more than restore our personal energy; it also sparks new ideas about how we might better live together. No matter who we are or how we live at the moment, isn't this our most pressing need?