

Social Capital

Recently I found myself on a phone call with my beloved 88 year old Aunt Edith who lives in the “other Manchester”-- in New Hampshire, where I was born.

My aunt and I have been close all of our lives. This phone call allowed our intimacy to deepen further, something that, if one is lucky, is the outcome of knowing someone for your entire life.

I'm sure you can think of people like my aunt who you have or may have once had in your life and that sense of deep intimacy.

Like all of us, Aunt Edith's journey through life has had many high moments. A six-decade plus marriage to my uncle Milton, my father's middle brother. The birth of her two children. The marriage of her daughter. The birth of her grandchildren. Both grandchildren becoming bar mitzvah. A comfortable life in a home that she loves, in a city she knows like the back of her hand where she has lived the majority of her life.

Like all of us, Aunt Edith's journey has had many jagged edges. People she has loved deeply have died too young. People she loves deeply have become sick. People she cared for, deeply, came in and out of her life.

Even her own health, which has been on a downward trajectory for many years, still she clings to the idea that there may be something, anything, that may make her feel better.

It's not easy.

Yet she stays in life, and not just her own life.

She is actively involved in the lives of others, even at age 88.

Her husband Milt calls her the “optimist's optimist.”

Yet there is something else that I think works in her favor.

My beloved aunt cannot imagine thinking about the world without all of the people that populate her life.

Through each and every challenge she has encountered she still offers others words of comfort, words of hope, words that inspire being in life. You could say she is a cheerleader in the most profound sense of the word.

This is a woman who has every reason to be down.

Yet she is not.

For people who have a high degree of caring, interpersonal relationships thrive.

Aunt Edith has social capital: and she uses it.

Similarly, when I worked during rabbinical school at the Jewish Home for the Aged in San Francisco, a place where over 400 elders reside, I discovered something: those who lived at the Home who were happiest were those who continually interacted with other people and the world around them.

They did not see their lifestyle as impaired because they were in a so-called nursing home.

Rather, they experienced themselves as fully alive, living in a safe environment where their needs were fully met--medically, psychologically, and most importantly, socially.

Those who got up and out of their rooms every day to imbibe all that their world had for them were turning an institutional setting into a true home.

These happy people in the Jewish Home were using their social capital.

Both Aunt Edith and the happy residents of the Jewish Home are people who have been in life a long time.

So you might ask: what is this "social capital" of which I speak?

Is it financial?

Is it a rich bank account?

Is it career success?

Is it keeping up with the neighbors in terms of possessions and accomplishments?

No. No. No. And emphatically No.

Social capital is one's multivalent ability to be engaged with others in life.

These qualities--the high degree of caring, empathy, outreach, and connection--taken together are a recipe that social science has shown to have a high positive correlation to a sense of a happy, well-lived and accomplished life.

Dr. Cecile Andrews, with a doctorate in education from Stanford, says that social capital works: "Studies indicate that social capital is one of the biggest predictors for health, happiness, and longevity."

Indeed social capital does that. And--it is not original to the good Dr. Andrews.

Wouldn't you know it, but Jewish tradition has something to say about it, long before social science could investigate social capital.

Of course we use a different, but similar, term.

In the Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors, Hillel, the great rabbi whose teaching we emulate in our daily lives, is quoted as saying:

Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community.

Such a profound idea expressed with such simplicity: one needs to be in community to form social capital. Without community your social capital account is empty.

When one separates one's self, one is quite alone, the inverse of social capital.

It is not good for you as an individual, it is not good for the people you encounter in community, and it is not good for your overall health when you encounter the challenges in life that all of us encounter.

Social capital is about being in caring relationships with other people, the antidote to loneliness, to self-isolation, to being anonymous amidst the lives of other people all around you.

The idea, then, of social capital was known by Hillel's intuition.

It is now known by social research.

Still the question must be raised: if Hillel in Pirke Avot is able to discern this almost two thousand years ago, and now social research is telling us something similar in our day and time:

that social capital is a predictor for health, happiness and longevity,

Why do so many of us negate the idea? Why do too many of us still think that what is important in life are the things that other people have and we don't?

How do we actively consider raising our own social capital?

Robert E. Lane, a professor emeritus of political science at Yale, in his book *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* shows how social ties not only affect our personal health, but also our societal health.

He observes that as prosperity in a society increases, social solidarity decreases.

Happiness not only declines, people become more distrustful of each other as well as their political institutions.

Lane argues, in language that many would consider somewhat radical, that we must alter our priorities; we must increase our levels of companionship even at the risk of reducing our income.

Our ability to reach outside of one's self

to be present with others

to be engaged in the lives and worlds of others

all of this requires us to be conscious

Remember Aunt Edith and the other people at the Jewish Home for the Aging with rich levels of social capital? That even with all of life's ragged edges, which all of us experience, they still see being in life as the only place to be, that being vested in the lives of other people as the only way to be, and that they cannot imagine it being otherwise.

Put another way, even extremely successful people if success is measured on money, career, and things can be unsuccessful in life if their attitude is one of disengagement from other people, pessimism, and seeing the glass as half-empty.

Whatever you want to call it: optimism, a sunny personality, living in the moment, consciousness, extroverted, outgoing--living in a world of social capital is perhaps the most successful measurement for a life well lived.

But what if you're not like my aunt or those people at the Jewish Home? What if you're sitting here thinking: well, that's good for other people but it's not me.

Fortunately you are using a part of your being that is most malleable, your brain. In our brains we have a limbic system that regulates our emotions. Because of the brain's inherent malleability, that is, its ability to reprogram itself, you have within you the possibility of changing your outlook, little by little.

It begins by recognizing where you are, in the moment.

Those of us who are outgoing and optimistic know who we are. There are those for whom this is a much more challenging way of being in the world.

For all of us, though, let me offer two approaches that have the potential to move you from where you are to an even better place.

Remember that last night I spoke about how change is possible as adults grow in their lives.

The most important co-factor of having social capital is being a person who is conscientiousness.

People who are conscientiousness tend to be fairly well-organized, prudent, and persistent, aware of who is around them in life, and attentive to managing their own lives, as well as being empathic and involved in the lives of others.

As KATHERINE BOUTON writes in the New York Times:

There are three explanations for the dominant role of conscientiousness. The first and most obvious is that conscientious people are more likely to live healthy lifestyles, to not smoke or drink to excess, wear seat belts, follow doctors' orders and take medication as prescribed.

Second, conscientious people tend to find themselves in healthier situations AND healthier relationships with their spouses, with their friends, in their vocational life.

The third explanation for the link between conscientiousness and longevity is that conscientious individuals are less prone to a whole host of diseases, not just those caused by dangerous habits. The precise physiological explanation is unknown but seems to have to do with levels of chemicals like serotonin in the brain.

So perhaps there is a biological element. More importantly, at least to my mind, is our ability to understand that who we are and what we are is based on the number and quality of relationships that we have with other people.

This social capital is the true currency for happier lives, for living life well, for being present fully in your own life and the lives of others.

On this day of renewal, introspection, and change, let us all think about our level of social capital. . .and think about in what ways we can each invest even more of ourselves to promote outcomes like my Aunt Edith or the elders of the Jewish Home in San Francisco.

Quotations on Social Capital

“Friendship doubles joy and cuts grief in half.” Francis Bacon

“Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.” Siddhartha Gautama Buddha

“You can always, always give something, even if it is only kindness.” Anne Frank

“I can live for two months on a good compliment.” Mark Twain

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

“The most precious things in life are not those you get for money.” Albert Einstein