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GUEST ESSAY

Can We Put an End to America's Most Dangerous Myth?

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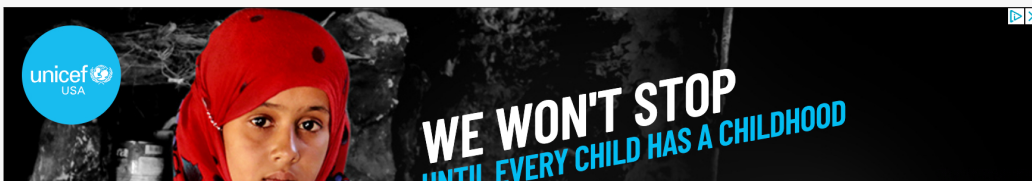
From a child's earliest age, independence is extolled as a virtue, with “doing things on your own” as proof of maturity. I celebrated my daughter when she was little for picking out her books herself. She always wanted to go on the monkey bars without help and swung and did tricks until her hands were blistered. Now that she’s 12, I cheer her for taking herself home from school on the train and for climbing by herself at a gym for hours.

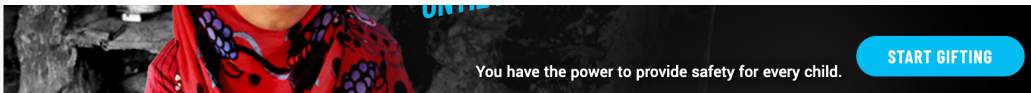
So, yes, some independence is worth honoring. But other strains are not as positive. For instance, being required to be “independent” when we are ill and without adequate health insurance coverage is not to be recommended. Neither is having to take care of our children entirely on our own, in the silo of our immediate family, without a state-supported nursery in sight. And going into debt for simply covering the cost of our own or our children’s college education is far from salutary.

But because Americans are taught that we must go it alone, we often force ourselves to slog through these — and other crucial human experiences — in solitude. And when we do get assistance, we may feel we must play down the help we receive from our government, our families or our neighbors.

The “we” here is we Americans, as the notion we must do without support is ingrained in our nation’s culture. Our most toxic myth is our “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” individualism. In extreme cases, we see even asking for help as something to avoid at all costs, which can be deadly, as in the rising suicide rates of older men in this country who are some of the least likely to ask for psychological assistance. Or we sometimes still call leaning on our close friends and partners “codependence,” even after a pandemic raised depression and anxiety to record levels. We also are regularly told by self-help manuals that we need to look only to ourselves to achieve mental well-being, even though that state inevitably — and biologically — requires social connection.

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It's time to value another facet of life: the power and skill of being dependent. I call it "the art of dependence."

"The art of dependence" means accepting aid with grace and, crucially, recognizing the importance of others. It takes dignity and skill to lean on friends, loved ones and colleagues — and even on the state. Resourcefulness is required for collaboration. We sometimes work hard to get what we demand: To secure aid from social services often requires what is known as the administrative burden — the effort, knowledge and sheer time it takes for citizens to obtain benefits. In a society that pathologizes dependence — even as every human being is born into it — being vulnerable takes courage.

Recognizing the art of dependence also means properly acknowledging how most Americans actually live: Some 25 percent of adults in the United States have some type of disability; more than 56 million Americans are enrolled in Medicare. In other words, tens of millions of us are dependent in some way on assistance. Needing support, be it physical or mental, or even making your way through complex forms to get unemployment money or student financial aid, is part of engaging with society. Indeed, asking for help and working with others demands patience, humility and organization in some cases, and social skills in others. (It can also take craft. In fact, the scholar William Hunting Howell, in his book "[Against Self-Reliance](#)," used the phrase "arts of dependence" to describe *crafts* that were supposedly derivative and collective, like early American women's embroidery.)

It takes craft and skill, for instance, to feed a family of five on minuscule monthly food benefits; or to navigate street crossings in a wheelchair, even if they are designed with street cuts made to regulation, or to access child care or find bosses who tolerate or even encourage taking sick days. And the Americans who say that the substantial contributor to economic inequality is the personal choices people make — the 60 percent of Republicans who say this, [according to a 2020 Pew study](#) — may imagine they are independent and masters of their own lives. But they

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too are not exempt from dependency. If they are privileged, they rely on tax breaks, colleagues and social connections, roads, telecom infrastructure, health insurance and their employees. Part of acknowledging the art of dependence means we release people from shame about their needs for others, and expose the lie of being self-made as it is propagated publicly by some of America's wealthiest people.

I have interviewed many people who not only accepted the art of dependence but also worked to create frameworks for healthy dependence and interdependence, for themselves and for others. They ranged from a New York City politician who started a mutual aid group in her Brooklyn neighborhood to a peer counselor at a nonprofit that offered assistance to adults with adverse childhood experiences, who thought caring for others in tough straits was far more important than resilience.

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They included the adjunct professor and single mother of two whom I spoke to in Portland, Ore. When we talked, she earned an average of \$30,000 a year. Her way into the art of dependence included not only supporting her children and teaching many students at different colleges, all on a subsistence income, as well as being part of a mental health peer support group that offered her respite from her unstable yet grinding work. Her peers included social work professors who understood her economic frailty and the grinding professional devaluation she experienced daily. The counseling often zeroed in, she said, on how “vulnerable I felt that I was always about to be unemployed.” It helped her a lot.

I have recognized the art of dependence in various ways in my own life. I have learned to fully acknowledge those who have helped me along the way and punctured the triumphal and false story line

of individual success. I think of my grandparents, who took care of me for most of the weekends of my childhood, offering me unequivocal care, quite a bit of which was nonverbal. (They had owned a small shoe store in the Bronx, which meant sometimes I was literally playing — probably my interest in taking back the term “bootstraps” is not a coincidence — with boots and shoehorns on the floor of their apartment.) Or the creative writing instructors who helped and praised me in my teen years, including the author Frank McCourt, one of my English teachers at Stuyvesant High School; he and others led me to become a writer.

More recently I have been dependent on my daughter’s caregiver Kylie for intermittent afternoon pickups, and the friends who call me and whom I call in states of duress or boredom, and the hundreds of people who have been involved in supporting the media nonprofit I run. Everyone is dependent on the support of others — whether that’s family, friends or the state — and coming to accept and appreciate that should help us to identify with those who are more obviously dependent, including the people who rely on government aid.

On the smallest level, we can start by rewriting our narratives about achievement and attainment. We can each question how we, both publicly and privately, tend to attribute our successes to our abilities alone. The original etymology of the word “dependence” from both Old French and Medieval Latin is “hanging down” or “hanging from” another. Learning this linguistic origin helped me appreciate the value of being dependent even more, especially as a parent. Dependence is, if you think of it, a form of connection and social cohesion. It brings us closer to others, which at this moment in America might be the thing we need most.

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Alissa Quart ([@lisquart](#)) is the director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project and the author of the forthcoming "[Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves From the American Dream.](#)"

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