Throughout its history, America has continued to reinvent itself, each time producing a better society for more of us than the one that preceded it. Reconstruction improved on the pre-Civil War republic. The New Deal created a “new America” that was a great improvement on the Gilded-Age America. The civil rights movement generated legislation guaranteeing the equality promised in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

This constant reinvention is fueled by what I call “the idea that is America”—the principles of liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility, and faith on which our country was founded. As I’ve written, our history is a continual “process of trying to live up to our ideals, falling short, succeeding in some places, and trying again in others.”

The next period of American renewal cannot come fast enough. The gap between the richest and poorest Americans is growing wider. In fact, the top 10 percent took in more than half of all income in 2012, the highest share since the data series started. Yet the United States has among the highest child poverty rates of any developed economy. We spend more but get less for our health care and education dollars than Canada, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and other peer nations. We are falling behind on these important measures of human progress in the world—but even more importantly, we are falling behind in terms of our ability to live up to our own values.

My personal vision is of a renewed America that cares—both about and for its people.

This will require a shift. Right now, we are a nation that embraces and thrives on competition, from sports teams to small businesses to Silicon Valley. But in the competition paradigm, success is defined in terms of who wins, typically through a combination of talent, luck, and working harder and longer than anyone else. In this paradigm, if everyone is pursuing self-interest and striving to beat out competitors to get to the top, society as a whole will benefit.

I’m all for competition—in its place. But we have lost sight of the care paradigm, which is the necessary complement to competition. As the great capitalist and philanthropist Bill Gates put it, “the two great forces of human nature are self-interest and caring for others.”

The care paradigm starts from the premise that human beings cannot survive alone. Our progress as a species flows from our identity as social animals, connected to one another through ties of love, kinship, and clanship. Success is defined not as individual victory but as group progress, whether the group is family, clan, community, company, or any particular subdivision of society. In the care paradigm, the individual does not disappear; the progress of the group advances the individual as well. All members of the group also have the security of knowing that whether they
are young or old, ill or weak, they will be cared for in their turn. So caring is part and parcel of 
building community.

An America that puts an equal emphasis on care and competition would be a very different 
place. We would invest in a national infrastructure of care in the same way that we invest in the 
infrastructure of capitalism. We would institute:

- High-quality and affordable child care and elder care facilities
- Higher wages and training for paid caregivers
- Support structures to allow elders to live at home longer
- Paid family and medical leave for women and men
- Flexible work arrangements and career life cycles to give breadwinners who are also 
caregivers equal opportunity to advance over the course of their careers
- Financial and social support for single parents
- Far greater social esteem for the “caring” professions

In short, we would build a social infrastructure that allows people to care for one another, in the 
same way we provide the basic physical infrastructure that allows them to compete.

All this talk of an America that cares is not pining for Neverland, but rather a call to recommit to 
a communal strand that runs through our history and our civic mythology. Frontier stories of 
barn-raisings and quilting bees are just as celebrated as Wild West shootouts between the sheriff 
and the outlaw. Nineteenth-century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville focused less on 
America’s rugged individualism than on our remarkable social capital—the civic associations we 
created for every purpose imaginable, or what he called our “habits of the heart.”

Coming together to advance a common purpose creates the bonds of trust and empathy that make 
us not just statistics and stereotypes, but visible to each other as individual human beings. It is 
then far harder not to care. This is the same social capital and cohesion that is the foundation of 
successful democracy and the indispensable precondition for achieving America’s founding 
credo of equality.

We are wired for it. Thirty years ago, psychologist Carol Gilligan (see her essay in this report) 
studied adolescent girls and identified in them an “ethic of care”—a dimension of human nature 
every bit as elemental as an “ethic of justice.” It turns out that “You don’t care!” is just as much 
a part of who we are as “That’s not fair!” Gilligan says that “given that children are less powerful 
than adults and rely on [adult] care for survival, concerns about justice and care are built into the 
human life cycle. The potential for oppression (using power unfairly) and for abandonment 
(acting carelessly) inheres in relationships.”³
This means that not being cared for is just as much a marker of inequality as being discriminated against. Both conditions are ways that those with power can enforce inequality against those without power—the young, the old, the sick, the disabled, the different, the structurally disadvantaged. “You don’t care” can mean “You don’t see me or hear me; you don’t give me equal regard.” But it can also mean “You don’t give me what I need to survive and thrive on an equal basis with my fellow citizens.”

I imagine a new America in which citizens recognize that providers of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual care are as indispensable to our society and our economy as providers of income. If we truly valued breadwinning and caregiving equally—as equal components of the American promise of equal opportunity—then we would value male caregivers as much as we value female breadwinners and every permutation and combination in between. But we would also recognize that single parents—who must be sole breadwinners and caregivers in families that often include elder relatives, as well as children—need special help and support. We would embrace marriage for everyone and support policies that would strengthen long-term commitments among family members, however these families might be constructed.

Even as we strive for equality in this next era of American renewal, we must also redefine and reprioritize the pursuit of happiness, the most personal of America’s founding values. Happiness can certainly be achieved through individual achievement, through winning the competition. But it is equally reached through a web of strong and fulfilling relationships—the warp and woof of connectedness and care. When we use solitary confinement as one of our most severe forms of punishment, we recognize the equation between isolation and unhappiness.

The biggest questions in 21st century America will be: “Who cares?”, and then, “If we do not care for others, who will care for us?” Let us answer those questions by reinventing ourselves yet again—competing fiercely, but caring deeply, too.

ENDNOTES

