An Excerpt From

*Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership For a Multicultural Age*

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PART ONE

A New Social Covenant

America was founded on the values of rugged individualism and competition. The next three chapters review how these qualities fashioned a society in which people have a greater orientation toward the self rather than the collective good. In the spirit of Sankofa, which beckons us to reconcile our past with our present, we question the historical belief in individualism, which asserted that human nature was driven by self-interest, competition, and acquisition. Individualism replaced early collective and cooperative cultures and established a social covenant in which government or society was a safeguard against man’s competitive and aggressive nature. In this worldview, leadership was the domain of the enlightened few, tended toward control, and was competitively oriented.

This view of human nature as self-centered and individualist is no longer suited to our world village, in which advances in technology and communication link us intricately together. In his visionary book, One: The Art and Practice of Conscious Leadership, Lance Secretan describes the idea of people being separate individuals as an antiquated concept: “We have become aware that the world is smaller, more interdependent, and integrated.” He continues, “Community is growing in importance. The new reality is that we are one.” 1 This, of course, is the basis for the indigenous
worldview, which has been sustained in the collective identities of communities of color.

In response to this new environment, the old individualistic form of leadership has been shape-shifting into a cooperative, collaborative, and people-oriented form. It may be said that leadership is changing from an individualistic, self-centered orientation to a *We* or *other-centered* orientation. This shift is in alignment with leadership in communities of color, which must be other-centered because leaders derive their authority from the people they serve, so they rely on the people’s support. Leaders are sanctioned by their communities by putting the collective welfare above self-interest.

Putting the common good first goes against the grain of individualism—*We* takes precedence over *I*. A deep sense of generosity, sharing, and reciprocity sustains this mutuality. Leadership in this context is not a vehicle for individual advancement, but instead is based on a collective orientation and responsibility.

The Principle *Mi Casa Es Su Casa* (my house is your house) expresses the profuse generosity in communities of color, in which wealth traditionally meant giving to others and assuming responsibility for community needs. To take more than one’s share and to accumulate excessive wealth was a cultural anathema. This generous orientation encompasses a long-term perspective that includes the sustainability of future generations and the natural environment.

Today’s interdependent and fragile world is calling for a new social covenant that is centered not on every man for himself, but on caring for each other and looking out for the mutual good. This covenant was envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr., who believed that other-centered men could build a society that would restore “dignity, equality, and freedom for people’s spirit,” a society in which “people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education, and culture for their minds.” King appealed to our morality and conscience when he said, “What self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up.”

An other-centered society would incorporate the core values of collectivism and generosity that emanate from communities of color. These values are the touchstones for multicultural leadership principles dedicated to building a benevolent and just society that upholds the well-being of all people.
In Search of Multicultural Excellence

Mainstream books on leadership routinely emphasize organizations and companies that represent “the ideal.” Books such as Good to Great, Built to Last, and In Search of Excellence put forth models that illuminate the possibilities when visionary leadership takes the helm. Authors do not spend much time with topics such as “In Search of Mediocrity” or “From Bad to Worse,” although there are myriad examples of organizations that are middle-of-the-road and leaders who falter in their commitments. By stressing the ideal—the best of the best—and by having positive models to emulate, leaders and organizations expect to improve and move toward that vision.

Likewise, when Anglo values and cultural norms are discussed, the positive attributes are usually highlighted and even revered. Individualism is rarely discussed as a value that may lead to social isolation and personal discontent as one is constantly comparing oneself to others. Competition is seen as a positive force that brings out the best in people and organizations, not as a stance that sometimes rends the fabric of a mutually supportive society in which everyone is valued. Youth is venerated and in alignment with the new and improved mentality of today’s marketplace; the youth cult is not presented as a dead-end street leading to a society with a short-term memory that disregards the wisdom of age and the lessons from the past.

Accordingly, in this book I will present African American, Indian, and Latino cultures from the highest standards of these communities. This is not to deny the inconsistencies and undesirable aspects present in all cultures. In communities of color, however, oppression, slavery, and colonization are historical traumas. Remnants of these difficult circumstances have resulted in higher rates of poverty, low self-esteem, and low educational levels. We must strive to separate the gifts and positive attributes in these communities from the residues of discrimination and oppression that manifest today as lower economic, educational, and social status.

The leaders whose voices resonate on these pages are some of the most talented and committed people who have guided communities of color in the past decades. They represent the ideal. Their values, approaches, and dedication have laid the foundation for multicultural leadership. Concentrating on the ideal is intended
to call forth the best in communities of color and construct a mental model of a desirable future state. As these communities step forward, embracing the leadership principles described in this book, they will embark on a bold and worthy journey to build a world that honors our human potential and celebrates our great diversity.

For mainstream leaders, recognizing this ideal is an opportunity to incorporate the best practices from communities of color into their repertoire and to acknowledge their promise and potential. Young and emerging leaders of color will expand their understanding of the tremendous contribution our communities bring to America. I hope this inspires them to stay true to the values that have shaped their communities and to realize that their greatest contribution comes from being the architects of our multicultural future.
Filling out my first U.S. census form, I went back and forth, turning the
form one way and then another, searching for a category that acknowledged my
Latino roots. I felt a loud thud in my heart as I finally checked the Caucasian box.
Latinos were not recognized as a group by the U.S. government until the 1980 Census.
The need to be accepted for who you are is a very deep longing in all people, but partic-
ularly in communities of color, whose members have been relegated to a minority status
and measured by a White ideal. As I filled out the form, I heard my grandmother’s sweet
voice, “Aye mi jita, nunca olvides quien eres y de donde venistes.” (“Oh, my dearest little
daughter, never forget who you are and where you came from.”)

This notion of remembering your roots and staying connected to your ancestry is of
biblical import in Black, Latino, and American Indian communities. Forgetting where
you came from is known as selling out, becoming an Uncle Tom or an Oreo or a coconut
(Black or Brown on the outside, but White on the inside). Staying connected to one’s roots
includes being in tune with the history and struggles of one’s people. Communities of
color relate to the past as the “wisdom teacher,” the source from which culture flows.
Sankofa, the mythical bird from West Africa who looks backward, symbolizes the respect African Americans have for the insight and knowledge acquired from the past. Sankofa reminds us that our roots ground and nourish us, hold us firm when the winds of change howl, and offer perspective about what is lasting and significant. Although Sankofa rests on the foundation of the past, its feet are facing forward. This ancient symbol counsels us that the past is a pathway to understanding the present and creating a strong future. Sankofa invites us to bring forward the meaningful and useful—including the values and spiritual traditions passed from previous generations—to learn from experience, and to avoid the dead ends and pitfalls of history. As the song that is considered the Black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” proclaims: “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.” The song also inspires hope, because despite past trials and tribulations, people survived and are now thriving.

Latinos connect to the past during El Dia de los Muertos by recognizing the gifts inherited from their antepasados and reflecting on the wisdom their ancestors have passed on. On this day, many Latinos compose an altar with pictures of their mother, father, abuelos, and other family members who have passed on. Surrounded by marigold flowers, flickering candles, and perhaps a mantle embroidered by their grandmother, they play old songs and tell stories about these relatives. Fried plantains, arroz y frijoles, rice pudding, or other special foods are made. Brandy, chocolate, strong coffee, and other delicious treats are left on altars so that those who came before know they are welcome, loved, and remembered. Latinos also take flowers and food to family burial plots, and thus the roots of the past are affirmed and strengthened.

American Indians believe their ancestors, the venerable ones, walk right alongside them and are accessible even though they have passed on to the spirit world. Prayers are made to the grandfathers and grandmothers, asking for their blessings and good counsel. The Navajos honor this connection each time they introduce themselves by referring to their heritage and lineage: “I am the grandson of . . . and the great grandson of . . .” Indian history, culture, morals, and values are passed on through the oral tradition in stories and
fables that often enumerate the feats of those that came before. “Learn from the past,” a slogan for the Native American College Fund, encapsulates the belief that by understanding history, people will not repeat past mistakes and can create a better future.

Through time-honored traditions, these cultures keep the past alive and accessible so it feeds the present. Since their history is a tale of conquest, cultural oppression, and racism, reclaiming and remedying the past is crucial to recovering power and wholeness. For many, this is not about times gone by, but their recent family history. Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Ana Escobedo Cabral grew up in a migrant family in the Santa Clara Valley, listening to the stories of her grandparents and great-grandparents. She says, “I feel very fortunate that I lived with several generations. I learned about the struggles they endured—losing children to disease and hunger, coming across the Rio Grande, and walking all the way from Texas to California with no money and then working in the fields.” Cabral believes this motivates her to improve the lives of others. “One thing that will always be culturally important is the connection to your own family history. Through that you’ll understand people’s pain, suffering, and struggle.”

Healing the Past

It may be difficult for many people to understand why we need to reconcile the past in order to build a pluralistic society and fashion multicultural leadership. Yet the vestiges of the past and the inequities that existed for centuries continue to impede inclusiveness and equity. For example, imbedded racism, which has its roots in slavery, was evident in the television images of the destitute and homeless Black people after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans. Inequality has lingered long after emancipation. Similarly, five hundred years after the conquistadores slashed their way through this hemisphere, Latinos still struggle with being colonized people. An example of this discrimination is that Latino wages are actually falling even as their labor participation increases. They are working more and earning less.2 Another is that Latino high school dropout rates hover at 40 percent, which is attributed to inadequate and poorly funded schools in high-density Latino neighborhoods.3 By understanding the historical systems that continue this type of discrimination, Latinos can remain resolute and stay the course.

Indian lands were snatched from them way back during pioneer times. After the Indians were rounded up and confined to reservations, Christian ministers baptized them
and banned many of their religious practices. Children were sent to boarding schools to learn the “White man’s ways.” Stripped of their spirituality and land, this great and noble people could have had their heritage wiped out like the bison that once grazed the open range. The movement to reinstate tribal lands took shape only in the 1960s when the first Indian lawyers examined the old treaties. The Indian’s battle for tribal sovereignty and cultural preservation persists today.

These examples shed light on how history continues to affect people of color and the reconciliation that is needed to create a truly inclusive future. Understanding and healing the past can move people beyond the vestiges of oppression and old transgressions. The reconciliation movement in South Africa sheds light on how the past can be a force for change and new beginnings. After people had suffered under the cruelty of apartheid, leaders urged them to come forward and publicly acknowledge their grievances and transgressions so that the past could be healed and a new country could be born.

In practicing Sankofa, our starting point will be the genesis of America. The convergence of certain European philosophies drove the exodus across the Atlantic and made the settling of the western hemisphere a de facto conquest based on the oppression of indigenous people. These antecedents set in motion a leadership form that was exclusionary and denied the history and contributions of diverse people. For mainstream leaders, understanding the history that gave rise to ethnocentricity is perhaps the most difficult step in transforming leadership to an inclusive, multicultural form. Sankofa beckons us to look at the past courageously and to learn from history, and it assures us that this will generate the clarity and power to construct a better future.

History recounts the events of the past, but not from an objective frame of reference. Depending on who wrote it, a certain perspective is espoused. Women in the last century, for example, were enlightened by the realization that males wrote history and how this affected their current status, self-concept, and collective empowerment. His-story and not her-story revealed a past in which men were the great heroes and women’s contributions were lost like etchings in the sand. Likewise, people of color know the prevailing history is also not our-story, but reflects
instead an Anglo and European philosophy and worldview. Communities of color see history in a different light. Sharing this perspective can level the historical playing field. Constructing a future that integrates the perspectives of all Americans must start with an inclusive historical foundation.

**Whitewashing the Settling of America**

OKAY, I’LL ADMIT IT. I am “old school.” I was raised in the 1950s, when the settling of America was presented in a romantic and adventurous way. “In fourteen-ninety-two,” my classmates chorused, “Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” I envisioned the first Pilgrims in their crisp white collars stepping off their boats, amazed at this vast and beautiful land, unspoiled and untamed. The first Thanksgiving was a wondrous feast with helpful Indians serving up hearty portions of squash and corn. My vivid child’s imagination saw covered wagons forging across the rugged plains to settle the wild, wild West. American history at that time was written of, by, and for the people who conquered this land; it described what happened from their point of view. And I believed every word of it.

What kind of trauma do persons of color undergo when the reality of what really happened to their ancestors unfolds like a jarring nightmare in the dark night? I remember my grandmother admonishing me, “Don’t wear your skirts too short, like I did.” As a Central American Indian she blamed herself, and did not understand that the ravishing of young native girls was a tradition carried over from the conquistadores, who took what they wanted. In fact, the Mestizo or mixed race throughout Central and South America is the offspring of the forced integration between Indians and Spaniards. For Indian women, it didn’t matter how long or short their skirts were.

The story of the settling of America is a cultural construct. The sugarcoating of history is a hard pill to swallow if it was your grandmother who was abused or your native soil that was lost. To build a multicultural nation, we must peer through a different looking glass. Are we going to refer to this as the *discovery and settling* of America or are we going to call it a *conquest, colonization, attempted genocide*? Was the land free or stolen? What really happened after Christopher Columbus set foot on the coast of San Salvador and the Pilgrims eagerly followed, landing at Plymouth Rock?

Looking at the past from this frame of reference may be disturbing, may be seen as
irrelevant, or, worse, may create resistance. Contemporary American culture lives in the *ahora*—the present. Getting things done now is imperative! The past is tucked away, mythologized, and certainly not seen as the backdrop for the present. Others may claim, “This is old hat! Do we have to revisit the antecedents of racism, again? Haven’t we done enough of this? Besides, it wasn’t me!” The individualist nature of American culture makes it difficult to assume a collective understanding of or responsibility for how the past structures our current reality and affects us today. Cultural amnesia results, so people have no memory of the trials and tribulations of the past.

Can we go down a different road? Is it possible that, by getting right up in the face of historical whitewashing, we can heal the social disease that finds justifications for why one group is better than another? Can we uproot the mind-set that proclaimed that this hemisphere was here for the taking and its inhabitants were savages? When the past is reconstructed in the bright light of honesty—or at least when everyone’s story is told—we can begin restructuring leadership from a Eurocentric form to one that’s more diverse and inclusive. We can construct a new leadership covenant that reflects and respects the history and culture of all Americans.

*Bueno;* to do this, our story must start before the Pilgrims and conquistadores began their stressful journeys. We must understand that the estimates of the native population in the Americas in pre-Columbian times ranged from a low of 12.5 million to a high of 25 million. Central Mexico alone, it is conjectured, contained almost ten times the number of people in England at that time.4

So why did Columbus sail the ocean blue in 1492, and why did the inhabitants of this hemisphere stay home?

The cultures of the western hemisphere as we will explore later were rooted to their homelands, whereas Columbus’s landing in America spurred an exodus among the greatest in history.

**The European Exodus**

Beginning in the sixteenth century, religion, politics, and economics converged in Europe, setting forth a new worldview. It defined man’s nature as acquisitive and competitive, supported the advent of capitalism, and provided a strong rationale—even a religious mandate—for conquering the Americas. The
Protestant reformation was in full swing. When Martin Luther, a devout Catholic priest and a purist by nature, nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, man’s very relationship to God was turned upside down. A central facet of Protestantism was that the individual did not need an intermediary such as a priest, a saint, or even Santa Maria—the Holy Mother of God—to communicate or have direct contact with God. This was heresy to the Catholic Church, which for centuries had controlled the pipeline to the deity through their black-clad priests and holy saints.

Fueled by Calvinism which had spread across Europe, the Protestant ethic propagated industriousness, duty, hard work, progress, and the accumulation of wealth. This was a 180-degree turn from the partnership-oriented early cultures that had stressed sharing and living in harmony with nature. Furthermore, Protestantism ran a pretty tight ship. Rules, formal regulations, subduing of the “pleasures of life,” self-control, and rationalism reigned. A diligent person would be working too hard to have time for such frivolities.

It was the entrée of economist Adam Smith’s idea of capitalism in 1776, however, that hammered the nails into the coffin of the mutually assisting early cultures. Capitalism compelled individuals to go in search of personal wealth. As the free-market economy proliferated, the belief in self-interest took precedence over public welfare or social good. The individual was now unfettered from the need to consider the effects of his actions on the collective. The free market economy, competition, and “survival of the fittest” replaced early communalism. Now the operating words were looking out for *numero uno*—every man for himself.

Political theorist and influential thinker Thomas Hobbes capped this off by espousing that the fundamental motivation of human nature was selfishness. Individuals, he believed, were in a perpetual struggle for advantage, power, and gain. Hobbes argued that society was simply a group of selfish individuals united together to maximize safety and protect themselves from one another. His social contract was based on human beings wanting a moral authority to safeguard them from their own selfish nature. This is evidenced today in the mushrooming number of laws intended to contain and police human behavior.

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One shift that altered humanity’s entire cosmology was the Newtonian concept of the natural world as a machine to be engineered for humankind’s benefit—a far cry from early societies in which the earth was considered a living being and humans a part of the intricate web of life. Hobbes and Newton provided a platform on which rugged individualism and materialism formed the matrix of the individualistic culture. Changing man’s relationship to the earth from steward to subjugator also set the stage for an economic system that allowed the using up and abusing of natural and human resources.

Writing in the 1950s, historian Max Weber accurately described the Protestant ethic that holds that accumulating money is an expression of virtue as the seedbed for the capitalist economy. Its proponents reason that making money is an expression of virtue and one’s purpose in life; thus, becoming wealthy is an end in itself—and even a moral imperative!7

It is somewhat incongruous that while Adam Smith was writing about the benefits of free market politics, there were approximately 26 million peasants in Europe who were unemployed and starving. Famine was widespread. In France, this led to peasant revolts and the destruction of feudalism. People became more autonomous and separate, more in step with the Industrial Revolution, which lured them to factories in urban areas. When people migrated to the city, they became, of necessity, more self-reliant. In addition, the means of production were consolidated into fewer hands. This intensified inequality in the societies that replaced the collaborative orientation of agrarian communities.8

This Land Is My Land

The European exodus spanned almost four centuries. The conquest and colonization of the western hemisphere was fueled by the overpopulation and the broken promise of the Industrial Revolution, which left many people earning meager wages and living in squalor. Armed with a strong Protestant work ethic, a competitive drive, and an individualist spirit, thousands made the long journey across the Atlantic seeking land, wealth, and prosperity. When the Europeans saw the expanse of the American frontier and its wealth of natural resources, it was bonanza—all systems go! As they saw it, their thirst for material gain, ordained by the Protestant god, was being fulfilled and sanctified by this new opportunity.

While their northern European counterparts came to homestead and profit, the Spanish conquest was shrouded as a holy crusade. The Catholic Church sent priests to
save the souls of the heathen savages—which didn’t exclude enslaving them and profiting from their forced labor. Unlike North America—which, despite the extensive habitation by thousands of native tribes, was essentially still a natural wilderness—the city of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) was larger than any city in Europe, with more inhabitants than London or Seville. Hernán Cortés found a radiant island metropolis laced with canals, with beautiful palaces and accumulated treasure. Consequently, there was a different kind of exploitation. Mass quantities of gold and silver were plundered and sent to the Spanish crown.

In his eloquent book *The Rediscovery of North America*, Barry Lopez proposes that the conquest was from the outset a series of raids and irresponsible and criminal behavior, a spree the end of which was never visible. Timber, land, gold, precious ores, as well as indigenous people, were bountiful and there for the taking. He notes that the conquerors’ belief in their imperial and unquestionable right, conferred by God, was supported by a belief in racial and cultural supremacy. Sanctioned by the state and the militia, and fueled by the Protestant ethic, the assumption that one is due wealth became justification for exploiting the land, water, and people. This acquisitive mentality meant there would never be a time when one would say *Basta!* (“This is enough.”) The new frontier was seen as boundless.

The indigenous cultures in America could not understand or withstand the avaricious and acquisitive behavior of their White conquerors. They had no frame of reference for dealing with a worldview so divergent from their own. Pre-Columbian cultures were tightly interwoven. The group took precedence over the individual. People shared what they had and cared for one another. Cooperation, not competition, nurtured the collective and group harmony. Many tribes had creation myths in which their homeland was bestowed by the Creator. Everyday life was punctuated with rituals and celebrations to mark the passing of the seasons. People strove to live in harmony with nature, which they regarded as sacred. These cultures honored the wisdom of their ancestors. The idea of getting on boats and crossing to another continent to find more land or resources was as foreign to them as the conquistadores on their large, swift, and powerful animals. They felt blessed to live in a place that was both beautiful and rich in the resources needed to sustain life. All that was needed was already here. Why would anyone leave one’s family, tribe, the comfort of community, and the sacred land that contained the bones and stories of one’s ancestors?
The clash between these two worldviews is illustrated by the story of Montezuma, the emperor of the Aztecs. Knowing the Spanish wanted gold, Montezuma took Hernán Cortés to his palace, where mounds of the precious substance were kept. He told Cortés, “Take what you want,” thinking Cortés would be satisfied. The emperor did not realize that the lust for gold was endless and this would only whet the Spanish appetite. Similarly, the Indians who taught the Pilgrims to survive their first winter and shared Thanksgiving dinner with them could not fathom that their new neighbors would soon declare them savages, devastate them with war and introduced diseases, and gradually herd them onto reservations.

It is difficult to calculate the number of distinct tribes that existed before Columbus, but it is known there were over a thousand languages and cultures. In the western hemisphere, only three can be described as acquisitive—the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas. Despite the fact that these cultures built empires that might be considered akin to the European model of expansion, they were also decentralized and, historical studies suggest, often preserved the cultures and languages of subjugated people. It is safe to suggest, then, that the cultures in the western hemisphere were overwhelmingly collective, lived in harmony with nature, and valued cooperation.

Perhaps it is fitting that this hemisphere bears the name of Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine explorer, because he saw the western hemisphere as a utopian world: “The people live in agreement with nature. They have no property; instead all things are held in common.” Without the concept of private property, there was no need for the strong tethers of the individualistic culture. “They live without a king and without any form of authority. Each one is his own master.”

Work and Individualism Become an American Ethos

When I have shared the preceding perspective on the “settling” of America with young college students of all races, they are usually captivated by the fact that they studied Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and the Protestant Reformation, but never connected these to current-day issues of racism or exclusion in America. I realize some readers may not share these sentiments and will instead feel uncomfortable and unsettled by these revelations. It is important to remember that people of color
have already studied history from a White perspective. To be successful, we have had to learn to think, speak, and act in ways that would be acceptable to the dominant culture. \textit{Authentic diversity, however, can only happen on a two-way street}—understanding must go both ways. Looking at history from a different point of view and considering the reason why the past is so relevant to people of color can be the springboard for learning to lead from a multicultural orientation.

Another incentive for examining the past is “fast forwarding” to the present and taking into account how unfettered individualism, the Protestant work ethic, and capitalism may be impairing people’s quality of life today! America may need a course adjustment. One benefit of multicultural perspectives is that they allow us to tap a wider range of choices and potential benefits. The next section, Principle 2, looks at the societal downsides that have resulted from the preeminence of the Protestant ethic and individualistic values. This sets the stage for discussing the benefits of balancing these values with the more communal ones that have supported and sustained communities of color.

The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, in his astute observations of our young country in 1835, noted that the characteristic he most admired was our individualism. He clearly warned, however, that if individualism was not continually balanced by other habits that would reinforce the social context and fabric of community, it would inevitably lead to separation and division.\textsuperscript{12} The respected sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues, in their book \textit{Habits of the Heart}, argue that the time de Tocqueville warned of has come—unchecked individualism has led to emotional isolation and fragmentation.\textsuperscript{13}

In his acclaimed book \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}, Harvard professor Robert Putnam identifies the phenomenon of withdrawal from community as both the cause and the result of larger social changes. As Americans become more isolated, civic engagement, social involvement, and volunteerism are declining. Even entertaining at home, the all-American pastime, has dropped 45 percent since the mid-1970s. Putnam documents that nearly one in five Americans moves each year. This means that
fully 20 percent are new arrivals who, it’s been demonstrated, are less likely to vote, join civic organizations, or build lasting ties with neighbors. He surmises, “For people as for plants, frequent repotting disrupts roots systems.”

A survey conducted among first-year students by the University of California since the mid-1960s indicates that the trend of disengagement is continuing. Young students in the 1960s had a much greater interest in civic engagement than in making money. By the turn of century, these priorities had reversed. Seventy-five percent indicated that being well-off financially was their most important concern.

As suburban sprawl widens the distances between people, we are losing familiar community meeting grounds and a sense of place. Putnam notes the increase in commuter time, estimating that every ten minutes spent in the car cuts civic engagement by 10 percent. Community connection points have been replaced by malls decked out with art and decorations, providing a festive air. People bustle around, shopping, drinking lattés, but the crowd is made up of strangers. These mass commercial spaces are designed not to connect us, but to move us from place to place or from store to store. We are in the presence of others, but the sense of belonging and community that was once the core of human identity is not being nurtured.

In 2006, researchers skeptical of Putnam’s theory conducted a major national survey, only to find that although people are networking on the website www.myspace.com, text messaging on cell phones, and blogging at all hours, they are less up close and personal than they used to be. One-quarter of those responding indicated that they have no one with whom to discuss the most important personal issues of their lives. The researchers reported that in the past two decades, based on comparison data from national surveys conducted in 1985, the average number of close friends an individual has dropped from three to two. The survey provides powerful evidence that supports Putnam’s research indicating that we are becoming increasing isolated even as cell phones, the Internet, and technology make us more interconnected.

Balancing Individualism with Community Good

The Protestant ethic, which equated wealth with virtue coupled with capitalist economics, forged a country with unimaginable wealth. Through their industriousness, Americans became some of the richest people on the planet,
boasting the fourth highest per-capita income in the world. Has the drive for materialism mutated into obsessive consumerism? The drive for more and more material consumption is apparent when we note that in 2005 the world’s average per-capita income was $5,800\(^{17}\)—and the average credit-card debt in the United States was over $8,000.\(^{18}\)

The emphasis on industriousness also instilled a propensity for overworking. Americans are the most workaholic people in the industrial world, putting in *three hundred and fifty hours* (nine workweeks) more on the job each year than their European counterparts. According to the Families and Work Institute, the number of Americans who feel overworked is rising like a thermometer on a hot July day, from 28 percent in 2001 to 44 percent in 2004. It is difficult to enjoy the fruits of one’s labors when working excessively; this also jeopardizes family life, community involvement, and health. Imagine how fulfilling life could be with nine weeks each year to enjoy family, travel, read and learn, take up a hobby, exercise, or engage in community service!\(^{19}\)

Does focusing on oneself and material acquisitions at least make us happy? Isn’t materialism a fulfilling trip to nirvana? The book *From Me to We: Turning Self-Help on Its Head* by Craig and Marc Kielburger, two young brothers who are Canadian altruists, disputes the assumption that “*mo money equals mo happiness.*” Citing a 2003 poll of 1,500 Americans by the Roper Organization, they concluded that unless you are desperately poor and do not have basic necessities, money has little bearing on how happy you are. Seventy-four percent of those earning less than $25,000 a year reported that they were somewhat or very happy with their lives. Interestingly, among those with incomes of $50,000 or more, this dropped to 10 percent.\(^{20}\)

The Roper study also found that “From this point on there was no discernible difference in overall happiness with friendships, standard of living, marriage, children, and appearance in incomes of $100,000 and more.”\(^{21}\) It was also noted that people who believe that money equals happiness are less satisfied with their self-esteem,
friendships, and life overall. It seems that once North Americans reach a certain level of financial security, making more money does not directly affect their level of happiness.

In support of these findings, the Kielburgers cite the World Values Survey’s assessment of life satisfaction, conducted in more than sixty-five countries between 1990 and 2000. The report indicates that the correlation between income and happiness rose at similar rates until an annual income of about $13,000 per person. After that point, having more money yielded little growth in self-reported happiness. Are Americans, who are some of the wealthiest people, the happiest people in the world? Hardly! The country with the highest number of happy citizens was Nigeria, followed by Mexico and Venezuela. Americans ranked sixteenth!\(^{22}\) Is this at least improving over time? Actually, it is worsening. In fact, the number of “very happy” people in the United States peaked in 1957. Even though Americans consume twice as much as they did in the 1950s, it has not made us happier.\(^{23}\) *Apparently, we were happier when we had less stuff to worry about.*

Returning to a *We* Culture

The next section, Principle 2, continues in the tradition of *Sankofa* by reviewing the change from the first cultures that centered on *We* to the individualist or *I* culture. *Sankofa* reminds us that for most of human history, people lived in *We* or collective cultures, in which the collective superseded individual gain. The strong hold of the *I* culture in America has weakened the support systems and relationships that once existed in extended families and communities. An indication of this is that more than one out of four Americans now lives alone.

The highly respected author M. Scott Peck, after searching for the keys to human fulfillment in his classic best-seller *The Road Less Traveled*, turned his attention to the role community plays in people’s sense of well-being. Peck found that people are thirsting for a sense of place and belonging. He envisioned a world in which a “soft individualism” acknowledges our *interdependence*. Rugged individualism demands that we always put our best foot forward, hide our weaknesses and insecurities, and put on a mask of self-sufficiency. This effort leaves people feeling exhausted, alone, and inadequate. Peck believed that humanity stands at the brink of annihilation if the bonds of community and interdependence are not rewoven. He prophetically stated, “In and through community lies the salvation of the world.”\(^{24}\)
This longing for community reflects the collectivism of early We cultures, which is still the essence of African American, Latino, and Indian people today. We satisfies our need to belong and have meaning in our lives. We values generosity and taking care of one another. Since collective cultures were the cradles of humankind, We is an intersection and connecting point that can bring people together. We means remembering that our collective efforts ensured our survival, and it holds the promise to our future existence.

Developing a We orientation, as found in communities of color, can be an antidote for healing much of the social malaise that unbridled individualism, overwork, and materialism have spawned. Thus, in the spirit of Sankofa in which we learn from the past, we can heed the good counsel given by de Tocqueville almost one hundred and seventy-five years ago—balancing individualism with collective good will reinforce the social context and fabric of community.25
Sankofa—Learn from the Past

Honor your heritage that you may honor the heritage of others

When people immigrated to America, they were urged to cut ties to their homelands, forget their customs and language, and merge into the melting pot. Thus, homogeneity and a monocultural approach emerged. A multicultural perspective requires honoring the history and culture of all people. To do this we must first honor our own heritage so we may appreciate the heritage of others.

This exercise lays the foundation for leading from a multicultural perspective. It is a reflective piece that participants may want to think about and research. I have found that sharing in dyads followed by a group summary works best.

- What is the story of how your family “got here”?
- What are characteristics, strengths, values, and family traits you have inherited?
- How have they helped shape who you are today?
- What else would you like to know about your heritage and how can you find this out?
- Who in your family might shed light on your heritage and family traditions?

Connect to your collective history, extended family, and “tribe”

This exercise illustrates the American Indian connection with their ancestors and their understanding that a person has a lineage that provides wisdom, guidance, and energy. Introduce yourself, using the Navajo greeting that delineates your lineage. Groups can
share this with one another and talk about the unique qualities of their ancestry. People who do not know the names and histories of their grandparents often begin to seek this out and reconnect to their cultural roots.

I am _________________________, the daughter/son of _________________________.

the great grandson/granddaughter of__________________________________________.

the great-great grandson/granddaughter of_____________________________________.

Discuss participants’ feelings about connecting with their past and their roots. Did they experience the power of ancestry?

**Seek out and learn from people with a different perspective on history**

To create our multicultural future, all people’s voices and perspectives must be welcome. History is not an objective narrative. Many people from communities of color have a different slant on historical events but have not shared this openly. A genuine dialogue on people’s historical perspectives can be the first step in creating open communication and learning from one another.

The following guidelines for dialogue can assist with this process:

- Listen and speak without judgment
- Respect differences
- Reexamine all positions
- Search for strengths and values in the way others see things
- Explore common ground
- Focus on learning
- Release the need for outcomes
- Seek to walk in another’s moccasins
Recommended readings and resources
