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INSPIRATION

America's essential spirit shines as it braces for the fight ahead

Over the past several days, we have been forced to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic will produce life-altering changes for us all. In what is perhaps the beginning of a generational correction, society suddenly seems to be returning to bedrock values that are central to the American experience.

Our current tendency to revel in entitlement, instant gratification, excessive consumption and self-absorption is giving way to the more traditional American values of humility, compassion and social cohesion. Overnight, selfies have vanished from social media. Instagram posts trumpeting lavish vacations have disappeared. Celebrities have become frivolous and uninspiring. In an instant, self-promotion seems grossly inappropriate. Wealth-signaling, cruel.

Instead, during this time of national emergency, we commend selfless health professionals for their determination and sacrifice to protect the elderly and unwell. We see unexpected acts of devotion to those falling victim to the first wave of economic hardship.

Our essential American spirit must be restored to confront the challenges we will face. We'll need to set aside the false sense of invincibility, the illusion that a better life is guaranteed, that our individual needs should always take precedence. We'll need to abandon the notion that comfort is an inherent right. We'll need to remember that sacrifice, and sometimes enormous sacrifice, is necessary for progress.

Employees at my company have been manifesting this col-

lective American spirit throughout the week as they braced for difficult times ahead. One cried inconsolably. Not for herself, but for the adversities a close friend will face since losing her job. A manager offered part of his salary to save the job of another. Not that he can afford it, but simply in an act of solidarity and benevolence.



BY PHILIPPE HOUDARD
Special to the Miami Herald

Amid the anxiety about what the future may hold, these acts present a glimmer of hope. The surrender of self, replaced with a focus on social cohesion, is an uplifting antidote to fear of the

unknown. When desperation sets in, there is always the risk that base human instincts may take us to a dangerous place of pure self-interest, fraying personal bonds and threatening social unrest. Fortunately, in the age of coronavirus, we don't have to look too far for positive inspiration.

My maternal grandparents in Louisiana were part of the Greatest Generation. Born into an era of hardship, they lived conservatively. They personified modesty and unpretentiousness and categorically rejected flashy or conspicuous consumption. In those days, especially while neighbors suffered, attention-seeking was considered crass, even vulgar. Fate for any one individual was unpredictable and unfair, so sharing with family, friends, colleagues and neighbors was a natural part of life. As the Great Depression ravaged the nation, my grandfather often took in family and neighbors in need of sanctuary — for as long as needed. My grandmother was often found

going door to door collecting for the March of Dimes. Everyone was in it together.

Half a world away, my paternal grandparents in France also embodied those values, having lived through the same era of economic depression and war. Their hands were thick and calloused from tirelessly working the land. Their own hard work and personal sacrifices knew no bounds. Work on the farm started before sunrise and ended long after sundown, doing their part to rebuild a nation after the devastation of World War II. They never complained, as it never occurred to them. Nor did they advertise their successes or contributions.

Many of us are now self-quarantined in our homes or apartments, the ultimate reflection of our strangely disconnected lives. But paradoxically, we are starting to return to emotional togetherness. In times of war or calamity, people pulling together out of necessity is not uncommon.

The nation is now mobilizing to defeat this microscopic but ominous threat, and we will need to tap into the national reservoir of determination, compassion and social unity which has historically preserved American life. By returning to the timeless values of the Greatest Generation, we can look forward to rebuilding a new and better society.

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