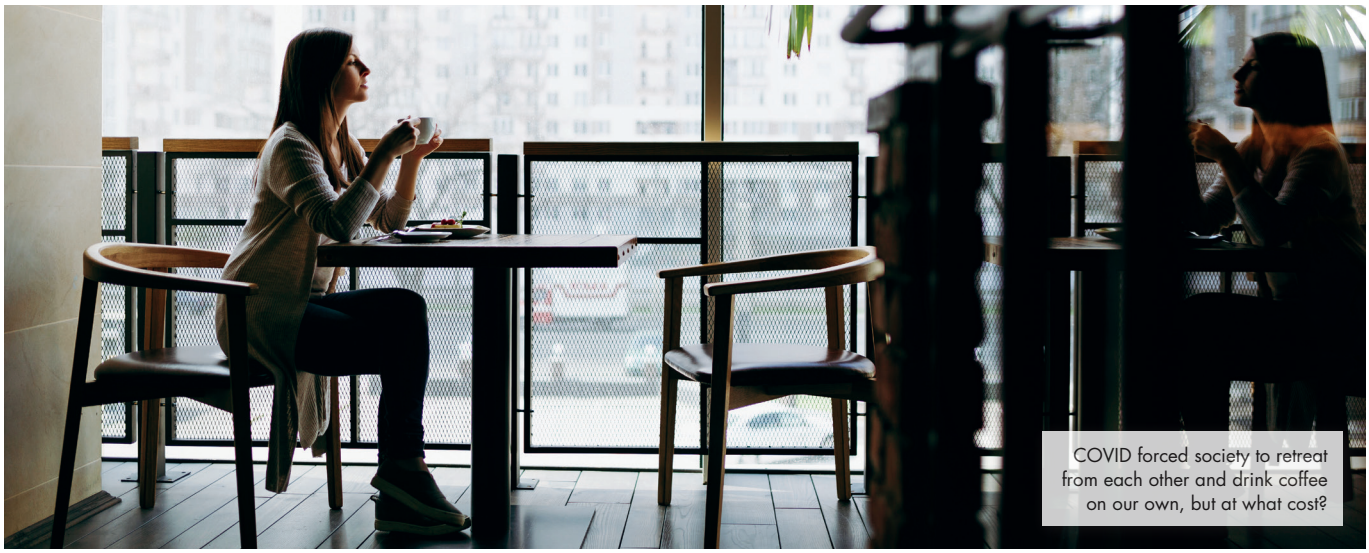


I. Me. Mine



COVID forced society to retreat from each other and drink coffee on our own, but at what cost?

Eversys' Kamal Bengougam on how our world has gone from being a community-centric society to an individualistic one. The question is, will people find a greater sense of identity, purpose and joy by replacing society with the sole spirit of self?

Recently, my wife Tracy broke her ankle quite badly and I had to become her carer. I did things I had never had to do before, to have another human being solely dependent on me. I must admit, it was not easy. I had no 'duck to water' moment. I stopped looking at the world through my own lenses and took up hers.

I wonder how my mother was able to juggle her job plus the running of a home with four demanding children and a husband that never helped at home. My belated appreciation and respect for her has grown exponentially over the past few weeks. To my mother, empathy, and giving, was a way of life, not just a word that sounded good in political speeches.

In the beginning, man and woman were created to form the first community, a platform upon which a just, moral, harmonious and loving society could be built.

Then, in a quest for knowledge, eyes were opened and the 'original sin', the desire for individualism, led to betrayal, isolation and a loss of identity. Morality became an option as the rules guiding society became fluid, a choice rather than a duty.

> "ART IS THE MOST INTENSE MODE OF INDIVIDUALISM THAT THE WORLD HAS KNOWN," – OSCAR WILDE.

This was followed by several millennia, periods of history spent between seeking the common good while at the same time trying to be seen, remembered, accepted, and even liked, perhaps. This quest for purpose and meaning has been forever slighted by a conscious, learnt mantra to help our fellow men.

It is often said that individualism began with the invention of the mirror. And yet, the mirror has been in existence since time began, if not in its current metallic state, but as long as humankind.

By legend, the first mirror was formed in the ancient Himalayas, when a little river decided to rest itself and form a little pool. In time, a young woman walked by and looking down, was surprised by another girl, which she slowly came to realise was only a reflection of herself.

The mirror gave people a sense of

physical identity, which gave rise to comparisons and ushered the birth of the spirit of competition, individualism.

Then the chair replaced the bench, followed by individual plates as opposed to communal food platters, fashion, wealth, power, influence...creating differentiation and a pecking order demonstrating that individuality is core to a person's identity, alike to a flower revealing its full beauty, a chrysalis becoming a butterfly, an inherent and intuitive part of our make-up, a DNA thing.

Differences led to wars and, in tragedy, people tended to unite, gathered and developed a sense of higher purpose, a common good, that in unity strength could be found. Prejudices are cast aside and societies gel against a 'common' enemy, as individuality is relegated to, placed in abeyance until the good times roll once more, and the spirit of self rises again, like an unquenchable thirst.

Politicians and philosophers have tried their hands at several manifestations of their thoughts: communism, socialism, capitalism, and various states in between, with no clear winner as every set of beliefs had a downside. And, as Martin Luther King Jr stated: "a good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism."

Communities used to be united by a sense of common values, tribalism. It used to be religion that either united or divided tribes into wars. Then came the 18th century enlightenment when religion ceased to be the source of identity, to be replaced by secular notions of nation, race and class.

Then came the '60s where utopian views were centred around individuals, spearheaded by John Lennon's Imagine – "a world without countries, religions, heaven or hell; a world with nothing to kill or die for". This liberalism was built around individuals being the 'bearer of rights' at the expense of the 'common good'.

However, humans are social animals and must belong to a tribe, live for a higher cause, a purpose greater than themself. We can see it in sports when supporters celebrate/clash based on their allegiances to specific colours. The 'I' has no identity. We are who we are because of the groups to which we belong.

What does that mean to our coffee community? Cafés have often been the place to meet, the environment where everyone knew your name. Then COVID came and we were told to stay away from each other, revert back to becoming individuals, drink our coffee on our own, no more stories to share.

This gave rise to new and more sophisticated robotic solutions, some even with two arms that can replicate complex latte art creations, clean and perform if not with warmth and grace, with absolute efficiency and consistency, limited downtime.

We can also witness the growing number of drive-thru cafés worldwide, even in countries that never had drive-thru before. In Asia, there are lanes for people who gaze at their phones at all times, and many people walk around with things covering their heads, eyes and contraptions stuck to their ears. Is that how we seek to evolve, shut down the outside world and hide within the imaginary comfort of our inner world.

Sociology books tell us that 'no man is an island' so how does that story end? If we stopped doing community does that mean that we will live in absolute silence or will strange voices begin to permeate, invade that void? Individuality was there from the start so it must be a good thing, part of the intelligent plan. But individualism can only lead to isolation, loneliness and fear. And fear often leads to aggression and aggression soon becomes pain. And pain is never a good thing, it was used as a prevention, a warning of what not to do. Look at the fate of Narcissus in Greek mythology, who so fell in love with his own reflection, beauty that he eventually died a broken man.

"I have no right to call myself one who knows. I was one who seeks, and I still am, but I no longer seek in the stars or in books. I'm beginning to hear the teachings of my blood pulsing within me. My story isn't pleasant. It's not sweet and harmonious like the invented stories. It tastes of folly and bewilderment, of madness and dream, like the life of all people who no longer want to lie to themselves." – Hermann Hesse

We must embrace individuality while still seeking the warmth of community. What would be the joy of life if we were to live it on our own? We were designed to do life with others, if not all of them, then some. A healthy identity can only emerge from a sense of individuality defined and developed within the context of a healthy society, not a state. I like my morning coffee on my own, but what would be my afternoon espresso without the chatter of good friends.

And, I am pleased to report that, after a few trying weeks, looking after my injured wife has become more than a mere duty, it has become a privilege. But, as she will be reading this, one should know that all good things must, in due course, come to an end. B



Cafés have long been the place to meet, the environment where everyone knew your name.