



I spend too much time on social media. I think we've established this.

When you spend too much time on social media, you can develop a skewed sense of reality – a “virtual” reality, as it were. As in . . . almost, but not quite. As in . . . fake.

One example of this fake take on reality is the general impression one gets that people – individual human beings – go around hating other people all day, every day. Spend enough time on Twitter and Facebook and you'll come to believe that Americans are clawing at each other's jugulars 24/7, locked in an ongoing un-civil war that feels endless, pointless, and positively fruitless. If you're the sensitive type, easily stung and discouraged, it can bring you to your knees.

But it doesn't have to. There is an antidote.

The super-secret fail-proof antidote to virtual reality is – drum roll, please – reality. Take it from an expert: If you wish to hobnob in the distortive dystopia that is social media – for whatever God-forsaken reason (“research” is my excuse) – then you, my friend, must fortify yourself with regular deep dives into society proper. If you insist upon engaging in *virtual* reality, you must also dose yourself with heaping helpings of actual reality. It's critical.

I was pondering this the other day at the YMCA, a place I sometimes think of as my ‘escape *to* reality.’ As someone who works from home – in front of a screen that yields all manner of wonders and horrors – I find the Y is just as important to my mental health as it is to my physical well-being. Even when my social calendar's blank and my dance card's empty, I'm

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Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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never in danger of becoming a genuine recluse – a mere country – as long as I've got my Y card.

virtual citizen of a virtual

The Y is where I remember what people are actually like. In person. It's where I chitchat with retirees and stay-at-home moms, firefighters and Marines, bankers and lawyers and merchants and personal trainers. It's where I've got friends – *actual* friends – who are black and white, male and female, gay and straight. Even Republican and Democrat. I've got friends who are much younger than I am, and much older, too. One in a wheel chair, and two who use walkers. There are toddlers in the nursery and 80-somethings in the weight room and people of “all race, creed and color” striding back and forth, and up and down, on the elliptical machines.

At the Y, we talk about our health. And our jobs. We talk about our kids and our parents, the humidity, dance recitals and proms and ball games, movies we just saw, what's on sale at Publix, and the egrets and herons in the rookery outside the Y window. Sometimes, we don't say much at all. We just smile at each other, ask “how ya doin'?”, borrow each other's spray bottles, and help each other figure out the equipment.

Does this sound mundane? I guess it is, and oh how I cherish it.

At the Y, we don't compare ideologies, discuss our positions on climate change, gossip about Stormy Daniels or speculate on the Russia investigation. We don't discuss how “intersectional” our membership is – though it truly is! – or worry about bringing more social justice to the weight room. (We *do* wait our turn on the machines, and spot those who need spotting. Some folks are in better shape than others!) There's no Me Too'ing or Time's Upping – the men are all very polite and well-behaved – and nobody's marching for anything, except on the stair master, for that last five pounds that just won't budge.

I did hear a couple of older gentlemen conversing about politics once at the Y, while power walking on the Cypress Wetlands Trail out back, but even then it was just good-natured sparring. They might as well have been yacking about the Carolina-Clemson game, from opposite sides of the fence.

The thing about the Y is that we're all there for the same reason – to become healthier and more fit. We're all... aspiring. There's a vulnerability that comes with that pursuit – for

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starters, you're wearing spandex in public! – as all your physical imperfections and weaknesses are on full display. Along with your sweat, your groans, your small failures and sad little successes. ("I added five pounds to the stomach crunch machine!") It's funny and humbling and rather poignant, especially considering the ultimate fate of man. You find yourself being gentle with others and appreciating their gentleness with you.

And here's the other thing about the Y: When you're there, you're encountering people one on one, face to face. Sprung from their group affiliations. Without their tribal armor.

(Spandex on imperfect humans is the opposite of armor.)

I've been reading a lot about tribalism lately. There seems to be a consensus among those who observe such things that America – indeed, the whole western world – is descending into tribalism at a dangerous rate. Jonah Goldberg's new book *Suicide of the West* makes the case that “

America and other democracies are in peril as they lose the will to defend the values and institutions that sustain freedom and prosperity. Instead we are surrendering to populism, nationalism and other forms of tribalism.”

Amy Chua also has a new book, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, in which she argues that America has always been tribal, while aspiring to be a nation where loyalty to ideals and principles trumps group loyalty. She says our devotion to that “ideal” vision of America has helped us restrain tribalism, but has also sometimes blinded us to the reality of our tribalism . . . which is now coming on like gangbusters, though some refuse to acknowledge it.

The truth about tribalism is that it's the most natural thing in the world. Our default position. And not just ethnic tribalism, either. Chua says the economic and cultural feud between the two “white tribes” – coastal elites vs. working class heartlanders – is mostly responsible for our current political situation.

“Tribalism in America propelled Donald Trump to the White House,” she writes. “If we want to understand this tribalism, we have to acknowledge the impact of inequality and the wedge it has driven between America's whites. ‘Coastal elites’ have become a kind of

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market-dominant minority from the point of view of America's heartland, and, as we've seen all over the developing world, market-dominant minorities invariably end up producing democratic backlash."

So there's something to chew on – just one of many theories I've seen bandied about out there in cyberspace, where the rise of tribalism is as undeniable as it is unsettling. As the various tribal factions continue to thicken their bubble walls on social media, pulling them ever closer, like sound-proof security blankets, and the dominant tribe continues to fracture into mini-tribes – all of them lobbing shells of insult and invective back and forth, day in and day out – I can't help thinking of Matthew Arnold's great, sad poem *Dover Beach*, which ends with its lovers declaring personal devotion in the face of social disintegration. On a "darkling plain" . . . "where ignorant armies clash by night" . . .

And when I start thinking this way, it's time to head to the Y.