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## For Immediate Release-Opinion

### Opinion: The Dangers of Isolation

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**August 11, 2016—ST. PAUL, Minn.—**How is it that in this interconnected, World Wide Web-connected age we find an increasing sense of isolation, of separation? One thousand Facebook friends does not equate with a single person in the same room—a living presence—whose gaze we can see and return.

In the urgency of recent days and weeks, when much seems to pull us apart, are we not all asking the same question? Who hasn't said, "What can I do?"

One of the most courageous acts each of us can do now is to turn to each other. Person-to-person, real life, in the same room. Look into each other's eyes. Listen. Really, deeply listen. Converse and connect with people beyond our usual circles. This is an act of courage because it asks us to be present and vulnerable. It asks us to reveal parts of ourselves that we can easily hide on the Internet, bury in a Twitter feed, and simply have vanish in 24 hours on Snapchat. Isolation is pulling us apart.

A common thread among many of the mass shooters of our time (Sandy Hook, Dallas, and Denver) is this isolation. This absence of friends: even one real friend, a real person in real time, flesh and blood presence with whom is shared a bond of mutual affection, respect, and belonging.

The isolated individual is more prone to illness, doubts, depression, and illusions. An isolated individual, without a bond of friendship, can be a danger not just to him or her self but to others.

There is also the danger of social isolation, of groups created by staying within a tight circle of people who only agree with one another. Circles of this kind with tight boundaries often isolate the people within those boundaries, not from each other but from "others," by excluding and denying the authenticity of others. To do this, it lives within its own stories of what really matters, of what is true, and of what to believe. This certainty leads to the denial of the reality and the truth of others.

We see how this isolation—excluding one circle of people from another—is dangerous.

As former U.S. President George Bush said in his July 12, 2016 speech in Dallas, isolation can lead to dehumanizing people, to making another person into some "thing" less than human. To quote Mr. Bush, "Argument turns too easily into animosity. Disagreement escalates too quickly into dehumanization. "

Words matter. When a person is dehumanized, made less than human to another, then degrading and violence is more possible. Stories, narratives of belief, matter. Joan Didion wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to

live." Yes, we live by story and live within story. But if I am trapped in a story that excludes all others, denies them their humanness, defines them as less than me, less intelligent, less trust-worthy, not worthy of the freedoms I enjoy, less truthful, then the danger to our democracy and our laws and civic life is high.

Right now, that danger is high. We hear and see stories told and words used that dehumanize individuals, whole groups of people, and even whole religions.

Yes, systems need fixing. New systems of justice, education, and government are needed. But change can start today, with you and me and in your community and mine. It's time to meet new people and build new relationships—in real time—across the divides of politics, color, and religion.

That is a necessary act of courage. And each of us can do it.

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