Human beings have learned over millennia that their survival depends on their ability to cooperate with others. And evolutionary biology has weeded out those who are weak at judging trustworthiness. Moreover, economic experiments such as the “ultimatum game” across different cultures show an economically irrational high commitment to fairness rather than self-interest. Our bodies appeared hardwired to cooperate; recent experiments in neurobiology show that oxytocin (the same biological substance secreted from our most pleasurable activities) rises when another person exhibits trust in direct proportion to the strength of the trust. And it creates a virtuous circle since as oxytocin levels rise people are more likely to reciprocate this trust.

More generally, a rapidly growing body of scientific studies under the rubric of ‘social capital’ has shown the benefits of being richly embedded in trusting and reciprocal social networks, whether the task is choosing mates, sharing tools and helping on each others’ farms during harvest time, getting job leads, or developing supplier relationships. These networks are always valuable to those in these networks, and often valuable to innocent bystanders as well (what economists call ‘positive externalities’) in predicting social goods, like enabling individuals to live longer, healthier and happier lives, have better performing governments, and live in safer communities, to name but a few benefits. In short, in the same way as physical capital (e.g. a screwdriver) or human capital (training) increases one’s productivity, so too do these social networks.

But at least in the United States, as my colleague Robert Putnam has written, we are a nation increasing Bowling Alone. The eponymous factoid is that more Americans are bowling than ever before, but not in bowling leagues, and it is in these regular and repeated social interactions that trust and reciprocity is built. In the U.S., these social networks have atrophied over the last generation and our social and civic lives have shriveled: we trust less, vote less, go to church less, meet friends less often and family dinners (extrapolating their current trend lines) may become extinct in our lifetimes. But the world does not seem to be beating to a global metronome on this score. In Germany, the nearest country for which such social trends have been analyzed, there is somewhat of a reverse pattern as a result of the legacy of Nazi Germany: the ohne mich generation (“without me”) generation is being replaced by a new generation that is not as wary of civic engagement.

Regardless of the inter-generational pattern, almost all societies live out an age-old struggle between individualism and community. And recently individualism seems to have gained emphasis by our focus on capitalism and free markets. While the market can

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1 In the ultimatum game experiment, person A divides $10, and person B can accept or reject this division. If the offer is rejected, both players get nothing. Economic theory predicts that player A will only offer $1 since B should accept $1 which is better than the $0 B gets if he rejects the offer. Instead, a majority of the offers across world cultures are relatively equal, despite the fact that empirically at least in one-shot versions of this game, unequal offers are not so likely to be rejected. On multi-series versions of this game, where the offerer alternates, there are obvious incentives to establish a trusting relationship early on.
be used to buy some of the benefits of social capital, it is rarely as efficient a mechanism. If neighbors don’t know each other’s first names, one can always pay for more cops on the street, but the neighbor’s knowing 10% more first names is a more potent crime fighting strategy than 10% more police. In the realm of education, one could similarly augment the number of teachers in the classroom by 10%, but having parents 10% more involved in their kids’ education (a social capital strategy) is a more effective technique.

At least in the U.S., we see the rise of market mechanisms to make up for the lack of social networks. TV commercials play an ever-greater role in elections, when shoe leather and person-to-person conversations historically used to dominate. Workers or immigrants used to band together to provide each other with social insurance; now much more impersonal multinational insurance companies provide some of the same financial protection without any of the social cohesion. A cellphone carrier recently unveiled a new product that enables male users to have a virtual talking girlfriend that one can “marry” and “treat to flowers and chocolate”, paid for through airtime, but presumably without any of the difficulty that comes from real-world relationships.

But consistent numbers of Americans and citizens around the world express a continued longing for a deeper sense of engagement and meaning in people’s lives that isn’t met by these market mechanisms. Strong historical work has not been done in these issues, but periods of high income-inequality and low social connectedness may lay the groundwork for individuals engaging in social entrepreneurship about inventing or reinventing the social institutions that will reconnect us with our fellow citizens. We hope that we are in such a period in the U.S., and quite possibly you are too.

This exhibit focuses on one element of social capital in Schwarzenberg – the time and talents that community members possess and freely offer to others. One of the characteristics of social capital-rich communities is that individuals do favors for others not with any immediate expectation of payment (that is, after all, what separates favors from commercial transactions), but because they know that person A will do a favor for B, and B will do a favor for C, and ultimately the favor-giver will receive a favor or conversely all these community favors will increase the quality of life in Schwarzenberg. And in communities with strong social networks, the reputation of people who are trustworthy or untrustworthy or kind or mean-spirited is effectively circulated.

There is a bit of bias in the following numbers (since some potential interviewees didn’t have much to say or refused to be interviewed, a likely indicator that they were not among the most civic of Schwarzenberg residents). Nevertheless, of the 241 Schwarzenberg adult residents who spoke of their civic engagement:

- 30% had 6-10 people that they could count on
- About 7 in 10 were active in various forms of neighborhood aid (most typically providing craft skills or activities)
- Almost three quarters of those interviewed were members of clubs or associations with the most popular groups being sports, Catholic Church women’s initiatives, music groups or volunteer fire brigades.
We encourage you as you go through this exhibit hearing about the private and public contributions of time, talent and treasure, you’ll reflect on some questions.

- How do these responses and surveys reflect your own involvement?

- Think beyond the favors extended along the social networks that generally form the backbone of such acts of kindness. Do you think about how much you socialize with neighbors, friends or family as a purely private matter? How would your investment in such activities differ if one focused on the connections between such social networks and the personal benefits (health, job prospects) or the community benefits (like safety, education, well-working governments, etc.) that flow from them?

- What types of things could you do to get more involved socially and civicly? We’ve listed in this catalog a list of nearly 150 things you can do to build social capital, but we invite you to develop your own list. We encourage you to form local groups: pledge individually to take certain social capital-building actions and then meet together socially and celebrate what you have done and hold yourself accountable for what you haven’t.

- As you think about the favors and public goods that you have done for one another and one’s social ties, think about the underlying religions, social class, and racial background of these friends. The bulk of social ties are with others like us (by race, or social class, or religion). What ties do you have with others unlike you in some regard? These “bridging” social ties can be extraordinarily valuable in linking communities more together, building greater solidarity, and avoiding a “we” versus “them” mentality. Think about the avenues like arts, sports groups, and community service projects, that one might start up or utilize to ensure that you and your children build stronger bridging social capital as well.