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Social Capitalism and the New Individualism

Jim Sikora
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Honors Convocation 2007
Jim Sikora "Social Capitalism and the New Individualism"

Jim Sikora: Hello out there. Congratulations to all the honorees—appreciate that and I'm grateful to be up here, although I couldn't have said that about a half hour ago when I was trembling in fear. Before I begin I'd like to introduce three people, three of my family members, who are very important to me—Gwen Marie, my loving wife and companion, fun companion, gifted body worker and an energy therapist, her—my daughter, Julie, and Julie is a very talented—a very talented alum from Illinois Wesleyan who is—who embodies the liberal arts and then she's used it in her business work and now is a successful mom and hospital consultant, and I also have granddaughter Ella, five years old, beloved friend, great playmate—

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: And aspiring ballerina and princess.

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: So would you please step—stand up for just a second.

[Applause]

Jim Sikora: Come on, Ella.

[Applause]

Jim Sikora: Thank you for all your support throughout the years, I appreciate it. And for all of you in this audience and those not here today who have contributed to my well-being over the years, thank you. I believe that people enter into our lives to teach us and if we are patient and active listeners, we hear them. Many of you in this room, up there in the balcony as well as down on the main floor here, have—have been there for me. You've touched me in countless ways and supported my personal growth. You have assisted in the construction of this quirky human being called Jim Sikora. Thank you all for doing that. My address today is mainly for the graduating seniors and the students in the audience, but the rest of you may eavesdrop and listen and whatever comments you'd like to adhere to. Graduating seniors, question: What are you going to do after completing your formal education? The obvious answer is that many of you will be employed somewhere in the world. I say the world because globalization has unleashed profound changes in peoples' work lives today. If at one time peoples' careers are dominated by employment with one employer and one position over the course of several decades—what we used to call the so-called "job for life", an era I grew up in—today many more individuals create their own career paths, pursuing individual goals, exercising choice, and attaining them. Often this involves changing jobs several times over the course of a career, learning new skills, and transferring them to diverse work settings. In a world where you won't know who you are working for or where you are working, in the U.S. or

elsewhere, each of you must have a personal plan—what I call a new individualism—and your generation, unlike previous ones, must move beyond the borders of the U.S. for you to prosper as individuals and us as a nation. Your intellectual vitality and knowledge require you to use your coveted liberal arts education to seek out diverse people in diverse settings. Whether in person or using some current communication technology, those other persons possess assets and resources, social capital, for you to succeed. Ironically, your new individualism will require other—other's social capital. And to assist you in communicating with those others, you will continue to use the many sophisticated technologies we have today like mobile phones and personal computers, but be aware, technology is not socially neutral. It changes the social relationships between people. For a moment let's briefly look at one breakthrough technology of my generation—television. We were unprepared for the social changes it would bring. Television would definitely change my view of the world. I remember my pre-teens, the early 1950s, the first television set to enter our working-class neighborhood. What a heart-thumping, exciting event for us. In those days it took two men and a strong boy to carry that heavy piece of furniture and mass of tubes into the house. It—to watch its giant ten-inch screen—you plugged it in, you turned it on, you hooked it up with a TV antenna, a gangly set of what we creatively called rabbit ears, right? You'd turn and voila! After about five minutes of warming it up and you waited and waited and waited—think about you and your computers, huh—you could see a very fuzzy black and white picture. We didn't care as we huddled together to watch the few hours of shows that were available. We cared—we cared about—we didn't care about picture quality because we were part of the Tech Age. We were somebody. My favorite show on Sunday night—the Disney Show. Since you're all dressed up, I thought I would dress up too. [Puts Mickey Mouse hat on]

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: Julie, you know where this came from? [laughs] Ella? Hi, Ella. [laughs]

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: There's a serious message here, really…[laughs]. Okay. Our—my favorite show was the Disney Show. By the way, did you expect Donald Duck? I don't know. Okay.

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: For me, Disney conjured up an imagined a future, a trail of dreams. One of my fondest dreams was to travel. His images of other cultures were truly magical and allowed me to daydream about other places in—other faraway places, places where I could escape an unsafe home, dominated—it still leaves me emotional—dominated by daily family conflict. A super shy boy who lacked self-confidence and feared most adults, I withdrew from the harm of my house often. Because of the compassion of others, many times I found protection with non-family peers and caring adults. They taught me and they guided me into the unknown, a future that seemed many times to go nowhere. The

twist was that even if I didn't have a life planned for myself, others did. They were my social capital. Pursuing and achieving my dreams one at a time, I gained self-confidence and optimism and I even learned how to be—not to be so super shy…[laughs]…as many of you know. My life became a series of constructing new identities. This new individualism created itself many times in my teens and adult years. Was it risky and confusing? Did I feel some—that I failed sometimes? You bet. Still, I just kept moving forward. And during my growing years, what was the social impact of the television in our society? It seemed that now people spent more and more time in their homes watching the tube rather than socializing with friends and neighbors. Sounds like the kind of society we live in today. Think about the various iPods, laptops, cell phones attached as umbilical cords to various parts of our body. They attempt to dominate our waking lives. We are near each other yet each of—but few of us are interacting socially except in some mechanistic way. Where are the—where's the human factor? Where are the simple courtesies, the face-to-face interaction? It seems to me that we've become a society of self-absorbed social isolettes, engaging each other only when we must. One scholar calls it "social malnutrition". I think that's an interesting term. Okay audience, it's your time for everyone—people know when I have talks I have audience participation, but I'm not going to do much, alright? [laughs] So be assured. How many of you in the audience have an iPod, cell phone, or laptop with you right now? Raise your hand. Wow. Let me get mine out for a second too…[laughs]. I think we're stuck with these, right? Well, thank you for doing that. [Phone rings] Oops.

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: Oh! A familiar sound. Oh, it's my mom. [Answers phone] "Hi, Mom. Yes, yes, I'm okay. Doing fine, yeah. I took my vitamins this morning."

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: She's such a worrywart. "Your luncheon yesterday with the pinochle club was a success?"

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: "They especially liked your potato soup? Wonderful news. Uh, Mom, I'm a little busy right now."

[Laughter]

Jim Sikora: "I'm talking to a few friends. Can I call you later? Sure, I—I know. I know when. Okay, I promise. I love you, Mom. Bye." [Hangs up phone] Familiar? What just happened? I was appreciating our moment together and helicopter Mom interrupted me and you had to wait until I hung up. This was your moment and we took it away from you. Unusual in our society? Not at all. It is part of the American ethos to put self-interest above others. It's a right based on a belief in—in a myth of rugged individualism. On the streets we children boast it, "We don't need nobody!" As a nation, we take a chauvinistic

pride in rugged individualism. It fits our—our economic system of capitalism because we believe that we are totally responsible for our actions. We have the right to choose our vocations, our mates, and how we spend our money. Our emphasis on rugged individualism keeps us from feeling obligated—hear that word, "obligated"—to anyone. Has this rugged individualist—individualism served us well? I don't think so. Consider: A recent study indicated that one in three Americans has never spent an evening with a neighbor. Never spent an evening with a neighbor, one in three. And consider the interesting results of a study published last summer in sociology's premier scholarly journal: "Researchers at Duke and University of Arizona set out to describe the social connection of Americans comparing responses from questions asked both in 1985 and 2004 part of an Annual Social Survey, the superstar of national surveys." Listen carefully, one of the questions: "To whom do you discuss important matters?" I repeat, "To whom do you discuss important matters?" In 2004, three years ago, twenty-five percent of the respondents, one in four surveyed, said they had no one to discuss important matters with, no one, one in four. This was triple the eight percent who replied to the same question in 1985. Look at the persons near you right now. If we are a representative of U.S. sample, every fourth person has no confidant. And that survey in 2004, another twenty percent, one in five, said they had just one confidant and many times that confidant is a family member. That means that forty-five percent of the 2004 national sample has either one or none. Are we connecting socially? Again, I don't think so. If this is rugged individualism, maybe we need a new individualism. Today people have much more opportunity to shape their own lives than they—once was the case. And one time when I was a young adult, tradition and customs strongly influenced peoples' lives. One social class, gender, marital status, ethnicity, even religious—and religious affiliation could close off opportunities or open up others. Individuals' personal identities were formed and determined in the context of the community in which they were born. The values, lifestyles, and ethics that prevailed in that community provided relatively fixed guidelines by which people were forced to live their lives. Under condition of globalization however, we are faced with a new move toward a new individualism in which we must actively construct our own identities. The weight of tradition and established values is retreating as local communities interact with a new world order. Globalization is forcing people to live in a more open, reflexive way. Even the small choices that we make in our everyday lives—what we wear, what we eat, how we spend our leisure time, and how we care for our bodies—are part of an ongoing process of creating and recreating our self-identities. Individuals in search of this new individualism seek authentic self-improvement and personal development. We are frequently reinventing ourselves to keep up with the social changes and to grow as people. We can't reach our full potential alone. We need the assistance of others, many others, and that's the social capital. What is social capital? Currently it's an international buzz word. Social capital means different things to different scholars depending on whether you're an economist, sociologist, psychologist, political scientist, educator, or business analyst, and it also depends on whether you're living in Switzerland, Australia, China, Germany, Italy, England, U.S., or Japan. I'll emphasize the social, the human networks that benefit self and society, and the capital part becomes the potential resources and assets of those social networks. How do we get those resources? We connect with each other in a trusting, other-centered way. Robert Putnam, the research guru of social capital,

emphasizes that social networks, norms, and above all trust—something highly missing in our society today—are important as we pursue shared goals. His social capital takes two basic forms—networks of individuals and groups that bond and those that bridge. Bonding social capital embeds people into each others' lives. It's an inward view, the strong cohesive that welds a group together. Family members bond, colleagues bond, good friends bond. Within these groups we learn about trust, integrity, social responsibility, credibility, and the rules of group living. On the other hand, when we examine bridging social capital, we are looking outside of ourselves. It's a linking of networks of people across diverse social divisions, social movements, national and regional associations, and gatherings of people, any kind of people with special interest. What kind of social networks do you need to achieve in life after Illinois Wesleyan? You will need both—to bond and to bridge—and to do it often. You must embrace the world society and the range of people in it. In the best traditions of the liberal arts, you must learn from others far and away—far and near, whomever they may be and wherever they may be. In conclusion, the wise Maya Angelou shares with us and I quote, "I've learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life." I've learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life. Let the liberal arts serve as the foundation for your new individualism and a guide to the social capital that will allow you to reach your dreams. Make a life and, in the process, you'll make a living. Good luck with your journey. Thank you.