Harvard scholar holds the threads to social fabric

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald
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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. (RNS) Harvard University scholar Robert Putnam has earned a reputation as an expert on the threads that hold America's social fabric intact. His 2001 bestseller, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," drew national attention to an alarming decline in civic engagement.

His new book, "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us," with co-author David Campbell plums the apparent divide between religious and non-religious Americans. Across 688 pages, the two argue that Americans honor their neighbors' religious differences largely because they've cultivated personal ties across sectarian lines.

As it turns out, Putnam, 69, lives by that same ethic, intentionally shortening distances between Jews and Christians, Americans and internationals, heartland believers and coastal skeptics.

It's a long way from Putnam's hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio, to the ivy-covered walls of Harvard, but friends and associates say the relationships he formed along the way continue to deeply inform his work.

"I'm talking to people in the grocery store, he's talking to congressional leaders," chuckled Virginia Park, who's known Putnam for almost 50 years since their time together at Port Clinton's Trinity Methodist Church.

"But he's never lost touch ... He reaches back into the community and communicates with people," especially during important times like reunions or a death in the family.

Putnam's co-author, Campbell, said there's still a lot of Port Clinton that shows up in Putnam's approach to his work at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

"It's easy to caricature someone like Bob as just a pointed headed intellectual who lives in Cambridge," said Campbell, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame. "Bob is an intellectual, and he does live in Cambridge ... but he comes from a background that I think gives him a healthy perspective on the role of religion in American society."

Over breakfast at a cafe near his office, Putnam dived in; he'd been up working until 3 a.m., as he does six or seven nights a week. With an amiable manner and Abe Lincoln-style beard, he looked ready to blend back in to life among religious conservatives of his rural youth.

When research for "American Grace" brought him from famously secular Cambridge to a conservative Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation in Texas, the evangelical terrain didn't feel especially foreign to him.

"Actually, it wasn't so strange," Putnam said. "We went to a church picnic up under the oaks on the grounds of the church, and it was wonderful. I didn't feel like, `What am I doing here?' I felt completely comfortable in that setting."

Putnam is concerned, however, that many Americans don't share his fluid comfort among believers and non-believers. Instead, they fear people unlike themselves, often out of ignorance.

"People who are really secular and don't really know much about religious people at all ... project their worst fears," Putnam said. "They imagine that all evangelicals are would-be theocrats, that they're sort of Taliban-like and would like to get rid of all the non-Christians. Conversely, evangelicals (and) other deeply religious people know about secular people from what they see on TV and think, `These people are really godless ... They're Satan personified."'

When he started work on "American Grace," he was confident "that they were both just wrong."

Research for the book confirmed that hunch: on the whole, neither seculars nor religious people are as hostile or eager to undermine the other as they're purported to be in popular media.

They call it the "Aunt Susan Principle," the idea that "whatever her religious background (or lack thereof), you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven.

"And if she is going to heaven," Putnam and Campbell write, "what does that say about other people who share her religion or lack of religion? Maybe they can go to heaven too."

Putnam's own religious journey mirrors many of the findings in his book. In 1963, he broke with contemporary norms by marrying a Jew from an intellectual Chicago family. Within a few years, he'd converted to Judaism.

Putnam isn't one to debate theology. He says he's "puzzled" on theological matters, though he declines to describe himself as agnostic or anything else. He notes that on high holy days, he attends services not as an academic observer but as someone "there to worship God."

His rabbi at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Mass., Howard Jaffe, said Putnam has helped him better appreciate the intrinsic value of tight-knit communities and improve his relationships with religious leaders in the area.

"My conversations with Bob always inspired me to be more open to and aware of what's going on in other religious organizations," Jaffe said. "Bob's work on the importance of working together (with non-Jews) inspired me to be more involved in developing that kind of social fabric."

Putnam brings his passion for well-formed communities to his professional life as well. The research team for "American Grace" included about 25 graduate students and other assistants, who were encouraged over meals to tell personal stories from their varied backgrounds as Catholics, evangelicals, Mormons and others.

So deep is Putnam's commitment to learning from others that he keeps an easel upright in his living room at all times for spontaneous brainstorming sessions.

"He loves people, and he loves ideas," said the Rev. Sean McGraw, a former research assistant who's now a Catholic priest and assistant professor of political science at Notre Dame. "Working in teams gives him the best of both."