

Why we lead the nation

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

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As we walked out of a room where my 95-year-old father-in-law had just had an eye exam, he wheeled his walker into a waiting-room area. To say the least, he's not quick on his feet. What's more, he needs at least four. One of these days that walker will be closeted, and he'll have to back into a wheelchair. I know he dreads it.

But here's the point. When we got to the waiting area, a circle of other patients were already seated, leaving just a few open chairs. "Well, Jim," he said, "where would you like to sit?"

He's asking me my preference. It was a chore for him to get to the room, but when we got there the first thing he thought of was my convenience. That's the point.

I take him to the eye doctor once a month or so, all the way to Sioux City. He doesn't get out much, doesn't care to. It's a lot of work if you're 95.

But when I drove up to the Home yesterday, his car (yes, he still drives—not far and not fast) was standing in the parking lot ready to go and he was just getting out. He'd put his walker in the back of the SUV by himself, so the only way for him to get to the passenger side was by moving slowly around the front, hands on the hood one after another to keep himself righted.

A shopping bag with cups and some kind of cookie, as well as a thermos full of coffee was already there between the front seats. He always takes something along—for me. We get coffee at the eye doctor's every time we go, but, just in case, he brings something along too, for me.

Such undying selflessness can be overdone. He'll tell us how good our hamburgers are, but I can't imagine him complaining about the ones he gets at the Home. Some do, I'm sure. He won't. At times, I wish he would.

It's pure, unadulterated self-abnegation, true and total self-denial and self-sacrifice. Not everyone has it, of course. I don't doubt that a few of his resident friends complain when they should and even when they shouldn't. But my father-in-law probably won't.

Where does that selflessness originate? Part of it, I think, is derived from a theology so deeply implanted in him it's almost unrecognizable to him, despite the fact that he has it in spades. It's a triumph of the Golden Rule. Thinking of others is hallowed, the way life is supposed to be lived.

He's a child of the Depression too, of a time when there was little to share because there was nothing in your hand. To go without is something he understands, and he'd just as soon not have others experience it.

Life itself taught him self-abnegation. Leaving school after sixth or seventh grade wasn't his choice. Economics in the family made it a mandate, a given.

My father-in-law is not a saint; he's human. But he is what a ton of his generation—"the Greatest Generation," Tom Brokaw called them—was and still are. He is selfless, sometimes to a fault.

When two Harvard economists' research determines that, if you're poor, Sioux County, Iowa, the place where I live, may be the very best place to move, they argue what they do because of the nature of community here. My father-in-law is not alone, after all; he's part of a generation created by an principled, abiding faith and a practiced work ethic that developed in a world without choices. His inherited blend of Calvinism made work into a calling, a spiritual blessing in a system where all things were "of God."

Self-abnegation creates communities in which giving is greater than getting, in which marriages have a stronger chance of holding up, in which schools honor their children and keeps all their kids "above average." Selflessness creates life and sustains it, makes my neighborhood a good place to live, a place where a poor kid has a better chance to leave poverty behind than almost anywhere in America.

But we get arrogant really quickly when we simply expect everyone to be like us. Selflessness turns into selfishness overnight when its roots dry. Piety created

prosperity, Cotton Mather once quipped about his Puritan culture, and the child ate the mother.

Siouxland doesn't lead the nation in welfare payments or low-rent housing or jobs with a living wage. It's among the very best in sustained marriages, quality education, and peaceful, loving neighborhoods; and that's why poor kids can make it in Siouxland.

Where self-sacrifice is a way of life, people win.

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