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Book Review: Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope

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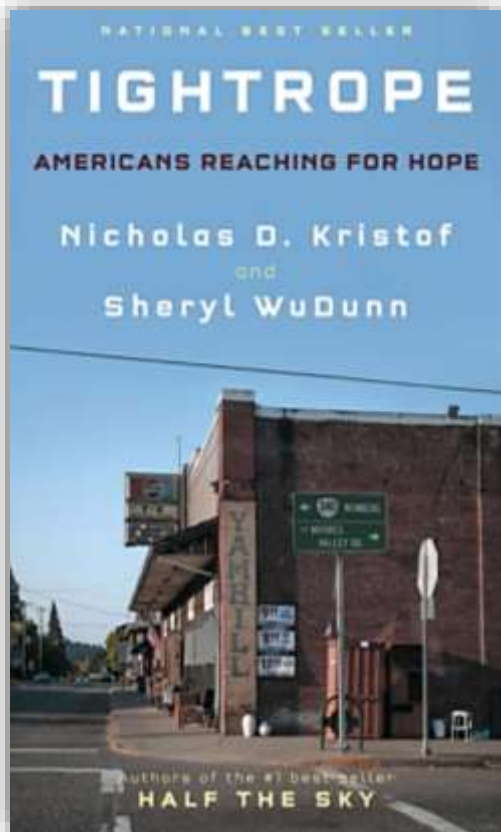
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Tightrope Americans Reaching for Hope

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New York

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Pulitzer Prize winners Nicholas Kristof (*New York Times* columnist) and Sheryl WuDunn (former *Times* business editor) begin their most recent non-fiction work, *Tightrope – Americans Reaching for Hope*, with a dedication to “all those passing through the inferno.” Such Dantesque imagery proves to be a purposeful preparation for what is to come. This inferno is referenced throughout the book through poignant narratives of “unimaginable calamity” (p. 7). The calamity is attributed to the disintegration of American working-class communities; a “wrong turn” taken by American leadership due to their “malign neglect” for over the last half-century. Indeed, this book is an urgent call for authentic and transformational leadership that has “...a coherent plan to address the challenges” (p. 10).

Tightrope’s twenty chapters delve into these challenges. “Wisdom quotes” cited by notable historians, political figures, artists, and children’s book characters set the tone for each chapter. The authors describe the narratives as “profoundly personal” due to their own ties to Yamhill, northwestern Oregon — the book’s key area of focus — “...where the grasses of the Willamette Valley merge into the forests of the coastal range, where fields of grass seed, golden wheat and Christmas trees, and orchards abounding with apples, cherries and hazelnuts, blanket the earth to the horizon” (p. 5). This portrait that may appear ideal to many is shattered by brutal revelations of misaligned policies linked to the deterioration of the region’s social fabric, crumbling of its family structures, and disillusionment of too many of its individuals. While Yamhill lies at the heart of this book, similar situations are described across the country where “for much of working class America, of whatever complexion — the dream is now dead” (p. 12). The second half of the book draws more predominantly on stories of hope, resilience, and resurgence that shed light on living examples of ways to move forward and are conveyed with a heightened sense of empathy and compassion.

Chapters 1-9 succeed in conceptualizing the ongoing problem of the decaying working-class by historicizing the collapse of upward mobility. The first chapter offers a gripping introduction to the Knapp family situation in 1973. This reviewer found this opening chapter – and heart of the book – introducing readers to the “kids on the number 6 school bus,” riveting. The book’s lead author, Nick Kristof, was one of those kids. The tragedy is that “about one-fourth of the kids who rode with Nick on the bus are dead from drugs, suicide, alcohol, obesity, reckless accidents and other pathologies” (p. 8). The stories behind these children and their familial demise begin with Dee and Gary Knapp together with their five children. Gary is described as a “decent fellow when sober, a brute when drunk” (p. 3). The flames of violence and abuse that prove to scorch this family can shake readers to the core. Emotions may be wrenched while reading about Dee hiding from Gary’s gunshots in the fields; worrying about him taking his anger out on their children...engendering the loathing they already had for him. The paradox between such destructive circumstances many working-class families face en route to the American dream is examined. For instance, in the late 1970s, the Knapps were well on their way towards achieving middle-class status due to Gary’s union job and Dee’s employment as a tractor driver. They were the first in their migrant-farmer families to own a home equipped with electricity and plumbing (Dee is said to have laid the pipes herself). The opportunity for their children to take the #6 bus to school was a privilege that neither Dee’s nor Gary’s families ever had. Despite this, only one out of the five Knapp siblings survived adulthood. Four of them “wandered off course... into a dark wood” (p. 12) by dying from drugs, alcohol, and crime-related conditions that many Americans and their ascendants increasingly face.

The book cites alarming statistics and rising trends of individual destruction. The authors claim that affluent Americans continue to ignore these phenomena. American politicians, journalists, religious leaders, business executives, and educational leaders are criticized for disregarding the growing problem of disintegrating working-class communities, and even blaming the tens of millions of victims themselves for their predicament.

Chapter two is grounded in data-driven arguments as well as references to political debates and research concerning America’s world leadership claims. The medial if not low rankings of the U.S. compared to other developed countries concerning internet and clean water access parallel similar low scores in personal safety, life expectancy, and high school enrollment. Leaders of religious and public social institutions are accused of lacking the cohesive tools and positions of empowerment they once exercised. Weakening capabilities are attributed to institutional systems pushed to focus more on preserving the organization rather than attending to the needs of individuals for whom it was designed to serve. These factually-based arguments are positioned alongside stories of “escape artists,” accountings of victims of incestual rape and similar severe childhood traumas who managed to avoid substance abuse and criminal exploits. Comparing such apples with oranges may open one’s eyes to the notion that problems working-class people face may have more to do with limited opportunities rather than a lack of ability. A call for returning to more compassionate, person-driven policies is further substantiated in Chapter three’s narrative regarding the experiences Kevin Green – another former #6 school bus kid who was once talented, driven, and lively. Failures of the American educational system are further underlined by Green’s entry into adulthood; the problem of limited vocational education avenues for children who are not academically inclined pair with the disappearance of blue-collar union jobs as opposed to the rise of more “aristocratic,” white-collar opportunities. Many children made to drop out of high school like Green did love to work, but faced diminishing opportunities. The story of his eventual

destruction is linked to his low sense of self-worth due to his inability to find decent-paying work.

The authors further underscore short-sighted, systemic policies. For instance, Chapter five presents an historical overview of how America once fashioned trail-blazing economic and social policies that created more opportunities to a much greater segment of society. Much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were riddled with social safety net programs and job initiatives that other countries later emulated and many formally adopted. The authors assert that in the 1970s “America went off track, beginning a nearly half-century drift in the wrong direction” (p. 55). This is around the same time that narratives about people “lifting themselves up by the bootstraps” became popularized, shifting from a sense of collective responsibility. Much of the phenomenon was ascribed to the rise in income disparities in the U.S. compared to Canada and Europe; the growth in wealth accrual in the U.S. occurred for only the top one percent – and the notable decline in American educational leadership was evident throughout the nation. Income and tax impediments that frustrate and alienate many Americans equipped with only high school diplomas were not similarly constraining upon previous generations.

The current political environment is accused of taking advantage of grievances associated with such impediments. Chapters 5-8 offer meaningful arguments about the resulting increase in polarization, racism, and disillusionment gripping the country. They draw on inter-racial and inter-state parallels pertaining to “the suffering as well as a uniquely American story about betrayal” regarding the role of big U.S. pharma, government, the nation’s incarceration system, and the government’s war on drugs. Contrasting scenarios of American approaches to criminalization versus educational solutions other countries have applied prove staggering. The authors provide examples of remediation – incidences eliciting inspiration and constituting messages of hope. One such example concerns the account of a police officer who refuses to give up on outreach efforts extended to drug offenders. Realities regarding the despair and physical agony faced by addicts during withdrawal as well as the bleak futures ahead of them deserve the attention the book provides. Chapter 9 draws on prior chapters’ stories, streamlining them back to Dee and Keylan Knapp – the sole survivors of what the authors refer to as people experiencing the “deaths of despair.”

Readers may appreciate the way Chapters 10-20 focus more on interventions, proposed solutions, and paradigmatic philanthropic programs. Replicating successful anti-recidivism, addiction diversion, foster care, immigration, and religious support programs proves critical. Inspiring leaders to implement systems in which educators and school counselors want to walk that extra mile to address the diverse needs of at-risk children is similarly imperative. Stories about ordinary people driven to create successful private and public collaboratives for healthcare outreach may galvanize readers. The truth about homelessness reveals that it is a social disease that affects both the unemployed and the employed. Solutions such as pressing for financial literacy curricula for school-age children are exemplified. Chapter 14’s story of a woman who was shot in the face by a juvenile later supporting his release from jail after hearing about the abuse he suffered is notably compelling. That example provides an important backdrop into the book’s discussions about pervasive corruption in for-profit prison systems and private juvenile detention centers. Chapter 16-17’s commentaries about political “lefts that talk left, but walk right” versus “rights that talk right, but walk left” when concerning family values reveals complexities seldom acknowledged.

The reader is further introduced to the children and grandchildren of the Knapps and others on that #6 school bus who have experienced their own problems with drugs, alcohol, and the law, demonstrating how “each generation inherits disadvantage” (p. 210). Evidence linking adverse childhood experiences (ACE) to “toxic stress” that is said to have a physiological effect on the brain’s anatomy is explained. This phenomenon led to the initiation of a California-based “public education campaign that has so far reached 31 million families with messages about childhood adversity, how it impairs health and how to heal” (p. 219). The campaign is being led by a former California surgeon general who facilitated the enactment of a state law providing screenings for ACEs — “a model that all states should adopt” (p. 219). Annette Drove proves to be the admired heroine of Chapter 18 as she opened a successfully-funded after-school program for teenagers at risk. The celebration of such success comes with the necessary reminder that, for whatever reason, government is still more willing to pay for incarceration rather than initiatives to actually prevent the commission of a criminal act.

The book’s final pages solidify its arguments for solutions driven by providing more opportunities for working-class communities. Examples of existing and developing initiatives for high-school dropouts in different states are extolled in their details. Commensurate with this theme, the final chapter is appropriately titled “America regained.” However, *regaining America* may seem more appropriate considering the substantial work and resources necessary to create and implement the solutions the authors promote, namely (1) high-quality early childhood programs, (2) universal high school graduation, (3) universal health coverage, (4) elimination of unwanted pregnancies, (5) a monthly child allowance, (6) an end to homelessness for children, (7) baby bonds to help build savings, and (8) a right-to-work bill.

While the nation is slowly getting there, there is much to do. The appendix lists “ten steps you can take in the next ten minutes to make a difference” that are not only insightful, but realizable in this reviewer’s opinion.

I highly recommend this powerful book, and pour my gratitude out to the brave individuals who have opened my eyes to their dynamic realities. Their life experiences can only prove to have a transformative effect on policy makers and scholars looking for avenues to advocate for change.

About the Reviewer



Noreen Ohlrich is a researcher and adult educator with over 10 years of experience developing programs that serve vulnerable populations. She earned her BA from the New York Institute of Technology, and MA from the University of Wales, UK before completing her EdD at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Noreen was awarded with distinction for her overseas doctoral research exploring the workforce integration experiences of migrant South-Asian women in Germany. A current affiliate of the SUNY Research Foundation, she now looks forward to furthering her research into the examination of human trauma, resilience, and the role of American faith-based organizations.

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