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## Finding ways to be alone together is a new American pastime

by Joe Ferullo

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It's easy to bemoan the digital age and how it's turned us all into self-centered addicts of individualism. But really, all this has done is made us much more American than ever before.

I was discussing this the other night with an old college friend from back East. He and his family had come to California for the first time in years to visit a sister in San Diego and a brother in San Francisco, with a little Los Angeles tossed into the middle of the mix. We talked about my mother (in Florida by way of the Bronx) and my cousins (still in Yonkers, just north of New York City). We are, we noticed, scattered -- in a very typically American way.

We both have friends and family in southern Europe (Spain and Italy) and went on about how family-centered life is there. There's the good friend from Manhattan who moved back with his wife and daughters to Spain despite a thriving career because they wanted to be closer to parents and relatives as the children grew up and they themselves grew older. There is my cousin from a small town outside Naples who now lives far away in Milan but gets home once a month or more -- and spends every vacation he gets back with family.

It's the main reason that a place like Spain has not imploded from its 25 percent unemployment rate (with much higher rates among the young). Younger workers stay with their families in a structure that provides a socially encouraged shelter from the slings and arrows of outrageous economic fortune. Imagine what 25 percent unemployment would do to modern America: The fabric would shred in a society defined far too sharply by measurements of success that include independence and individualism.

New York *Times* columnist Ross Douthat writes that we are more atomized than ever because of the

digital revolution. However, he also sees within that revolution a hunger for community and connection via Facebook, Twitter and the like.

But it's a very American connection -- it is "community" on any given individual's terms. I reach out to you and send you a message when I have the thought, the time. You respond whenever it fits into your life. We never really "connect" voice-to-voice (e.g. the telephone) or face-to-face (wow, an actual meetup). These digital tools don't add to our social interconnectivity; they replace it.

Again, very American. We move a lot, we leave others behind, as we seek our own way on "the road less traveled," fully aware we "can't go home again." It is bred in our bones -- digital media just gives us new ways to get there.

As my friend and I were wrapping up our conversation, I noted reports that show hard economic times here have actually slowed down mobility among the young. They are staying at home longer or are moving back in. Maybe that would shift the American dynamic? I wondered.

No, my friend declared. The Spanish do it, and they like it. Americans do it because they have to, and they hate it. We are closer physically, but psychologically and emotionally? No.

It's just not who we are.

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