

THE UPSWING: A JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN SOLIDARITY

INTRODUCTION

Across the last 125 years, America's story has swung between "I" and "We"—from rugged individualism to civic solidarity, and back again. This seminar invites us to step into that story together: to understand how the nation's moral and cultural fabric has strengthened and frayed and to ask how renewal might begin again—in our own time and community.

Drawing on *BYU address (2023) "America's Upswing"* by Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing* by Robert Putnam and Garrett, and the moral history of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, we'll explore how cultural change precedes political reform—and how moral communities like ours have been the seedbed of every American renewal.

SEMINAR OVERVIEW

WEEK 1 examines how America shifted from "I" to "We" and back again, tracing the moral foundations and cultural roots of civic life.

WEEK 2 confronts the exclusions within the mid-century "We," exploring how the Black freedom struggle and women's movements expanded the circle of belonging.

WEEK 3 studies the institutions and cultural values that once held the nation together—churches, clubs, associations, and moral leaders who sparked reform.

WEEK 4 turns toward the present, inviting each of us to play our part in building a new "We."

WEEKLY RHYTHM

- READ that week's section of this guide.
- WATCH the relevant parts of Garrett's *BYU address*.
- SKIM the noted chapters of *The Upswing* to familiarize ourselves with the key narratives and data.
- REFLECT on the week's questions.

This is a course in formation. Each week we revisit the same core movement—from "I" to "We"—to discover what solidarity without exclusion might mean today. Renewal begins when ordinary people, grounded in moral community, choose to take part in it.

"The task is not easy, but the success of the American experiment hangs in the balance."
— Shaylyn Romney Garrett

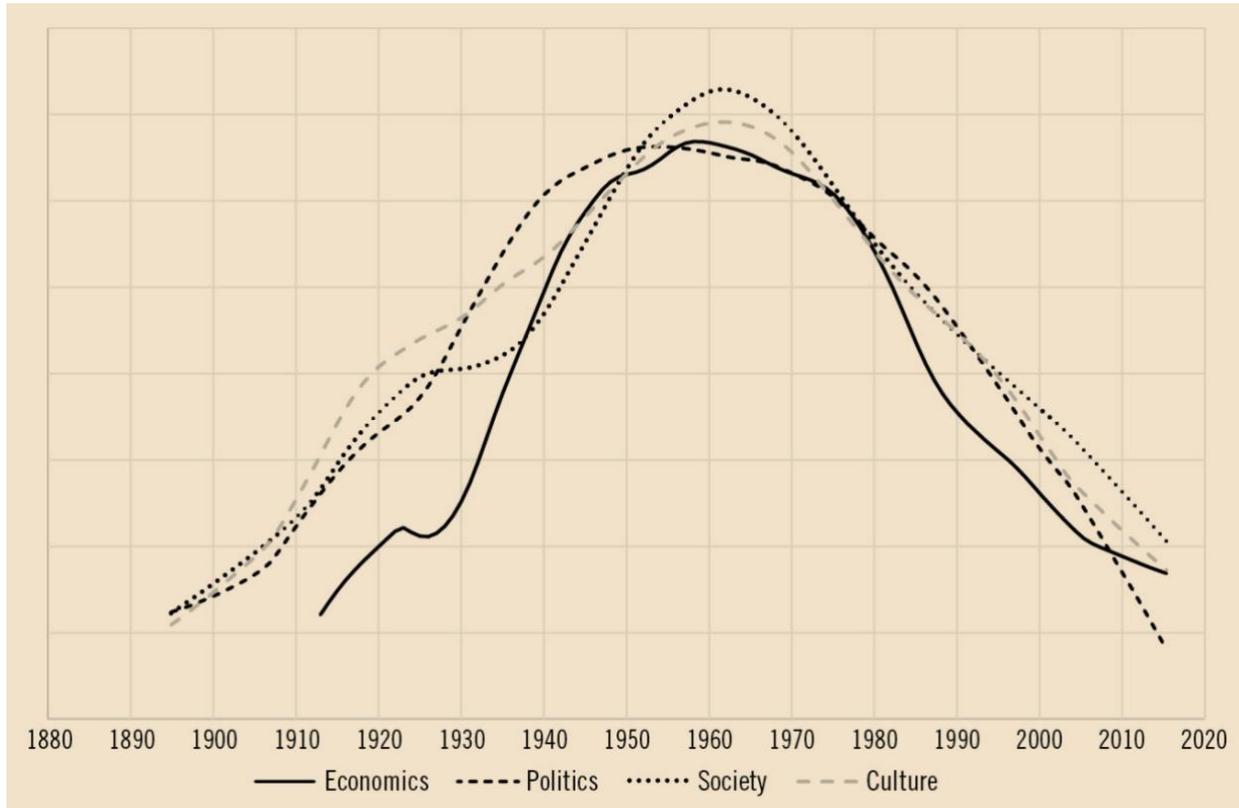
THE UPSWING: A JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN SOLIDARITY

4-Week Seminar, 2025

Learning Community, First Unitarian Church of Dallas

Prepared by Jay Dunn with Nancy Dixon

THE “I-WE-I” CURVE: 125 YEARS OF AMERICAN HISTORY (1890-2015)



Core Framework: The “I-We-I” curve traces 125 years of American history (1890–2015), revealing an inverted U-shape across four parallel trends: economic equality, political cooperation, social cohesion, and cultural solidarity. We peaked in the mid-20th century and have been in decline since the 1960s—but we’ve been here before, and history shows renewal is possible.

SOURCES

- *The Upswing* by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Upswing/Robert-D-Putnam/9781982129156>
- *BYU Address (2023)—“America’s Upswing”* by Garrett: <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/shaylyn-romney-garrett/americas-upswing/>
- *First Unitarian Church of Dallas History*: <https://dallasuu.org/about-us/our-history/>

WEEK 1: WHAT HAPPENED TO “WE”?

Understanding the Arc

CORE FOCUS

Consider the “I-We-I” curve and its moral roots. Trace how America came together—and fell apart—across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Explore how Tocqueville’s 1830s observations about American associational life contrast with both the first Gilded Age and our current moment.

REFERENCES

The Upswing

- Introduction: “What’s Past Is Prologue”
- Chapter 2: “Economics—The Rise and Fall of Equality”
- Chapter 3: “Politics—From Tribalism to Comity and Back Again”

BYU Address: Excerpt on Tocqueville and the American Experiment

“In the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed a nation that balanced rugged individualism with pragmatic communitarianism. ‘Wherever you see, at the head of some new undertaking... you would be sure to find an association.’ Americans had built a democracy grounded in both rights and mutual responsibilities. He asked whether this balance could endure.”

KEY IDEAS

- The “I-We-I” Arc: Four measurable trends—economic equality, political cooperation, social capital, cultural solidarity—create one statistical phenomenon showing movement from individualism to solidarity and back.
- Historical Parallels:
 - The late 1800s and today share extreme inequality, polarization, social dislocation, and cultural narcissism.
 - The pattern of decline and renewal shows that collective decline is not inevitable.
- Moral and Cultural Foundations:
 - Tocqueville’s “self-interest rightly understood” offered a moral foundation between altruism and selfishness.
 - Early America’s civic balance was both its strength and fragility.
 - Cultural values shifted first, preceding economic and political change.

DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Core Tensions to Explore:

- The authors argue we’re living through a second Gilded Age. What does it mean that the conditions of the 1890s mirror our own?
- Tocqueville saw Americans constantly forming associations for common goals. How does Tocqueville’s associational ideal appear—or vanish—in our community?
- If culture moves first (before economics or politics), what does that suggest about where renewal must begin?

ACTION ITEMS

- Personal: Notice this week where you experience genuine “We” moments versus performative solidarity.
- Communal: Identify one associational pattern in our congregation that has strengthened or weakened over time.

Supplemental Note — First Unitarian Church of Dallas (1899)

During this first Gilded Age, Dallas residents founded the First Unitarian Church of Dallas, seeking what they called “a broad and liberal Christianity.” Its constitution declared a purpose to “up-build... a rational, progressive, and exalting religion in the love of God and the service of man.” Like Tocqueville’s civic-minded Americans, they built an association grounded in mutual responsibility during a time of extreme inequality and rapid change— an early Southwestern expression of the moral awakening that would become the Progressive Era.

WEEK 2: WHO WAS EXCLUDED FROM THE “WE”?

Race, Gender, and the False Consensus

CORE FOCUS

Recognize the moral costs of the mid-century “We”: its racial, gendered, and cultural exclusions. Honor the reform movements that emerged both within and against the mainstream, understanding that the Black freedom struggle and women’s movements both challenged and expanded American solidarity.

REFERENCES

The Upswing

- Chapter 6: “Race and the American We”
- Chapter 7: “Gender and the American We”

BYU Address: 1890s Truth Tellers and Moral Leaders

“In 1892 Ida B. Wells began publishing accounts of lynching and the cruelty of Jim Crow. ‘The way to right wrongs,’ she wrote, ‘is to shine the light of truth on them.’ Her stories forced America to confront hypocrisy and injustice. Religious leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden echoed her moral appeal, declaring that true democracy required men and women ‘to whom duties are more than rights and service dearer than privilege.’ They called for a Social Gospel that placed community and equality at the heart of faith.”

KEY IDEAS

- The Paradox of Mid-Century Solidarity:
 - The civic “We” that peaked mid-century systematically excluded Black Americans, women, and immigrants.
 - Segregated solidarity did not automatically mean inclusion; belonging requires truth-telling and accountability.
- Parallel Institutions and Reform Movements:
 - African American churches, schools, and advocacy groups built their own “We,” laying groundwork for civil rights.
 - Women’s circles and clubs fueled suffrage and early economic participation.
- Moral Truth-Telling:
 - Reformers like Wells, Rauschenbusch, and Gladden exposed hypocrisy and called for a more inclusive democracy.
 - The essential question is not “how strong was the We?” but “whose We was it?”

DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Opening Question: Garrett notes that the Progressive Era’s cultural shift began in “places of moral formation and meaning-making” before it reached politics or economics. If our religious communities were centers of such moral formation then, what role do they play now?

Core Tensions to Explore:

- What does “belonging” mean in our community—and who defines it?

- Are solidarity and exclusion inevitably linked in American life, or can we imagine a “We” that doesn’t require an “Other”?
- How do UU values—particularly our commitment to “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”—speak to this legacy of selective inclusion?
- The authors show that Black institutions often modeled more inclusive visions while being excluded from the mainstream “We.” What does this teach us about where transformative vision comes from?

ACTION ITEMS

- Personal: Examine one assumption you hold about “community” or “belonging”—where did it come from, and who does it center?
- Communal: Research one way our congregation has grappled with exclusion in our own history.

Supplemental Note — First Unitarian Church of Dallas (1940s–1970s)

As America confronted its segregated “We,” First Unitarian Dallas became a Southern voice for inclusion. Under Rev. Robert Raible (1940s–50s), the church opposed segregation and emphasized human dignity and peace. Rev. Dwight Brown (1960s) led members to participate in the Civil Rights Movement, including Selma, while the Women’s Alliance launched studies on abortion and reproductive freedom. Their actions echoed the Week 2 theme: belonging requires truth-telling and moral courage.

WEEK 3: WHAT HELD US TOGETHER?

Institutions, Culture, and Moral Vision

CORE FOCUS

Explore the cultural, institutional, and moral infrastructure that sustained the civic “We”—and what we’ve lost as it declined. Understand how moral leaders, truth-tellers, visionaries, and everyday civic innovators sparked the last great upswing.

REFERENCES

The Upswing

- Optional revisit: “The Great Convergence” (pp. 38–39)
- Chapter 4: “Society—Between Isolation and Solidarity”, especially
 - Civics association data (pp. 113, 119, 125)
 - Religion and philanthropy data (pp. 133, 135, 140)
 - Worker solidarity data (p. 145)
 - Family formation data (pp. 148–155)
 - Social trust data (pp. 160–162)
- Chapter 5: “Culture—Individualism vs Community”

BYU Address: Cultural Shift and Associational Innovation

“American culture of the Gilded Age was defined by social Darwinism—competition as virtue and the strong as rightful survivors. The Social Gospel movement rejected this creed, teaching that political and economic change began as a change of heart. From this moral awakening grew a wave of associations: churches became centers of service, Rotary and Lions Clubs rewove the social fabric, and settlement houses bridged class divides. Labor unions won protections; Black churches and women’s clubs forged new civic spaces. These networks invented reforms that still shape our society—public schools, parks, libraries, and child-labor laws.”

KEY IDEAS

- Movements that Sparked Renewal:
 - The Social Gospel (moral leaders): Rauschenbusch and Gladden replaced Social Darwinism with community values; “What Would Jesus Do?” became a moral touchstone.
 - The Muckrakers (truth-tellers): Journalists like Ida B. Wells exposed racial violence and injustice, putting human faces on data.
 - The Visionaries (imaginative storytellers): Writers like Edward Bellamy inspired hope through visions of cooperative futures.
- Revival of Associations:
 - Churches transformed into community centers.
 - Civic and professional clubs rewove social fabric.
 - Settlement houses bridged class divides.
 - Labor unions advanced fair wages and protections.

- **Civic Innovations Born from Association:**
 - Citizens pioneered reforms: public schools, parks, libraries, food and drug safety, child labor laws, municipal utilities, and ultimately Social Security.
 - Ordinary people—not elites—drove structural reform.
- **Cultural Displacement & The Downswing:**
 - Expressive individualism eroded shared norms of duty and mutual care.
 - Associational life weakened as Americans “bowled alone.”
 - Religious and civic institutions declined as centers of moral meaning.
 - Moral change preceded policy: culture moved first.

DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Opening Question: Garrett identifies three types of leaders who sparked the last upswing: moral leaders, truth-tellers, and visionaries. Which resonates most with your own sense of calling or capacity?

Core Tensions to Explore:

- The authors argue that “culture moved first”—that moral and associational renewal preceded political change. Does this match your understanding of how social change happens?
- Look at the civic innovations list (public schools, child labor laws, etc.). These came from associations, not government mandates. What does this suggest about where transformative change originates?
- As associational life declined, what replaced it? What have we gained and lost in that exchange?
- Putnam shows we’re “bowling alone” compared to mid-century. But we’re also more connected digitally than ever. Are these comparable forms of solidarity?

ACTION ITEMS

- Personal: Identify one association or community group you could join or re-engage with this month.
- Communal: Name one way our congregation currently functions as a “place of moral formation” in the Garrett sense.

Supplemental Note — First Unitarian Church of Dallas (Mid-Century)

The congregation’s postwar period illustrates how moral institutions reinforced civic life. After building its permanent home in 1950, First Unitarian Dallas became a center for public lectures, interfaith dialogue, and volunteer service—embodying what Putnam calls “cultural leadership.” Like the settlement houses and Social Gospel churches of the Progressive Era, it helped reweave social fabric through association and moral vision.

WEEK 4: WHAT NOW?

Agency, Renewal, and the Path Toward a New “We”

CORE FOCUS

Synthesize insights and chart a forward-looking path. Consider how we—individually and collectively—can participate in a new civic upswing. Explore the choice between “drift” and “mastery” that defines our moment.

REFERENCES

The Upswing

- Chapter 8: “The Arc of the Twentieth Century”
- Chapter 9: “Drift and Mastery”

BYU Address: Call to Action and Roles in Renewal

“No one party, policy, or leader created the upswing. It was ordinary citizens who faced loneliness, inequality, and polarization and chose to master the moment instead of drifting. We inherit both their saved democracy and their unfinished work. Today the same choice is ours.”

“Maybe you are a moral leader speaking with compassion and conviction; a truth-teller who shines light on injustice; a visionary imagining bold new futures; a gatherer building bridges across difference; an organizer helping citizens find common cause; a joiner stepping out of isolation into community; or a civic innovator creating new solutions. Whatever your gifts, there is a place for you on the right side of history.”

“If we choose drift, the consequences will be disastrous. If we choose mastery, we can write a new chapter in the American story. As Theodore Roosevelt reminded us, ‘We shall go up or down together.’”

KEY IDEAS

- The Choice Before Us:
 - We stand at a crossroads similar to the 1890s.
 - The decision: continue drifting toward “I” or master the moment toward “We.”
 - Decline is not inevitable; renewal is possible.
 - Roosevelt’s reminder: “We shall go up or down together.”
- Signs of Renewal:
 - Bridge-building and youth-led civic efforts.
 - New forms of association and civic innovation.
 - Recognition of hyper-individualism’s costs.
 - Renewed commitment to mutual aid and collective action.
- What’s Needed Now:
 - Cultural and moral agency before politics.
 - Institutional imagination and experimentation.
 - Moral commitment to solidarity without exclusion.
 - Ordinary citizens acting as moral leaders, truth-tellers, visionaries, gatherers, organizers, joiners, and innovators.

- The Task Ahead:
 - Renewal begins in places of moral formation, not election cycles.
 - Each person has unique gifts and a role in this story.
 - Success is uncertain, but “the success of the American experiment hangs in the balance.”

DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Opening Question: Roosevelt said “we shall go up or down together.” Do you believe this is still true in 2025? What makes collective fate harder—or easier—to accept today than in 1900?

Core Tensions to Explore:

- The book shows renewal is possible but not inevitable. What would it take for you personally to move from believing renewal is possible to actively participating in it?
- Garrett lists seven roles (moral leader, truth-teller, visionary, gatherer, organizer, joiner, innovator). Which feels most natural to you? Which feels most uncomfortable—and why might that discomfort matter?
- The last upswing began in “places of moral formation”—churches, settlement houses, civic clubs. Where are today’s places of moral formation? Is this congregation one of them?
- How do we pursue solidarity without repeating the exclusions of the mid-century “We”?

CLOSING ACTIVITY: COVENANT FOR RENEWAL

Participants share one specific way they can contribute to the next civic upswing—through conversation, organizing, bridge-building, or creative citizenship. Consider organizing responses by the roles Garrett identifies:

- Moral Leaders: How will I guide the inner work of cultural transformation?
- Truth-Tellers: What injustice will I illuminate?
- Visionaries: What hopeful future will I imagine and articulate?
- Gatherers: How will I create new ways of being together?
- Organizers: How will I help people find voice and common cause?
- Joiners: What will I step out of isolation to join?
- Civic Innovators: What new solution will I experiment with or create?

Closing reminder from Shaylyn Romney Garrett: “The task is not easy, but the success of the American experiment hangs in the balance. We have weathered this storm before—and we can do it again.”

Supplemental Note — First Unitarian Church of Dallas (Present Day)

Today, under Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter, First Unitarian continues its civic and moral engagement through interfaith partnerships such as Dallas Area Interfaith, and inclusive ministry. Its work as a Welcoming Congregation for LGBTQ people and ongoing anti-racism efforts illustrate the kind of institutional imagination and moral agency that Garrett calls essential for a new upswing. The congregation models how renewal begins in moral communities, not political campaigns.