

## The Dugnad in Our DNA by Phyllis Cole-Dai

Dugnad. Say it with me: dugnad (doog-nod). It's a Norwegian word I learned this week; an ancient word, traceable to the Viking Age, when villagers would labor together to bring ships ashore after long seafaring trips. That's dugnad. In later centuries, Norwegian farming communities would work together to prepare for harsh winters and to survive other hardships. Dugnad. In the 1940s, Norwegians rallied to resist five brutal years of Nazi occupation. Dugnad.

Traditionally, dugnad is the collective effort of individual Norwegians who sacrifice their personal desires, and allow their own sense of "normal" to be temporarily disrupted, for the benefit of their community or country.

On March 12 of this year, after the first Norwegian died from COVID-19, Prime Minister Erna Solberg called for a national dugnad. She asked everyone in Norway to band together to reduce the spread of the disease. As a result, the country contained the outbreak, avoiding massive numbers of infections and deaths.

To my knowledge, I don't have any Norwegians in my family tree. But a concept similar to dugnad lives in my DNA. I call it "love of the neighbor," or "commitment to the common good," or "civic duty," or even "patriotism," in the best sense. I credit my upbringing, my spiritual life, and my liberal arts education, among other things, for cultivating in me a deep respect for others. But I suspect that I was born with the seed of this sensibility, just as you were. It's part of our nature as human beings. How could it not be? We've had to count on one another to survive since the dawn of history.

Sometimes, though, that seed of Us gets buried so far down inside, we don't even realize it's there. We lack fellow feeling. We'd rather do our own thing than devote ourselves to a common purpose, even in a crisis.

I keep hoping that we can find ways to strengthen our faith in one another. Maybe we could start, right where we are, by sharing frankly what we believe in—one person speaking at a time, while the rest of us listen. I mean, really listen, without mentally picking apart what we're hearing. Listening so well that when the speaker finishes, we offer only our thanks, without commentary. We now understand better, and that's enough.

Let's try it, shall we? I'll speak first, if you don't mind, since I'm already at it:

I believe in greeting each new day with a bow of gratitude. In nurturing the promise of children. In being faithful to friends. In being kind to strangers. In trying to love without clinging.

I believe in neighborly potlucks and pots of coffee. In bicycles and flowers and porches. In silence and solitude. In sanctuaries and wilderness. In letting things be. In sometimes losing myself in order to find myself again. In the necessity of pulling weeds in my garden. In the delight of digging potatoes and giving them away. In striking a fine balance between freedom and responsibility. In the power of naming. In the duty to vote.

I believe that the universe is big and our place in it isn't even a speck, yet what we do and say matters. I believe that joy is fleeting. That life is hard. That equanimity is possible, even in the midst of suffering. That life is a fragile web of kinship. That death is always close. I believe in the smallness of what I know, the value of what you know, the vastness of what we can know together, and the existence of what we can't know at all.

I believe in trees, especially old ones, and in the ever-changing sky, which has no borders. I believe that what's good for me is bound up with what's good for you. I believe in stepping over the line of what's nice for the sake of what's right. I believe in poetry and stories and music and art and dreams—everything that helps us to question who we are and to imagine who we might become, together.

I believe in you....