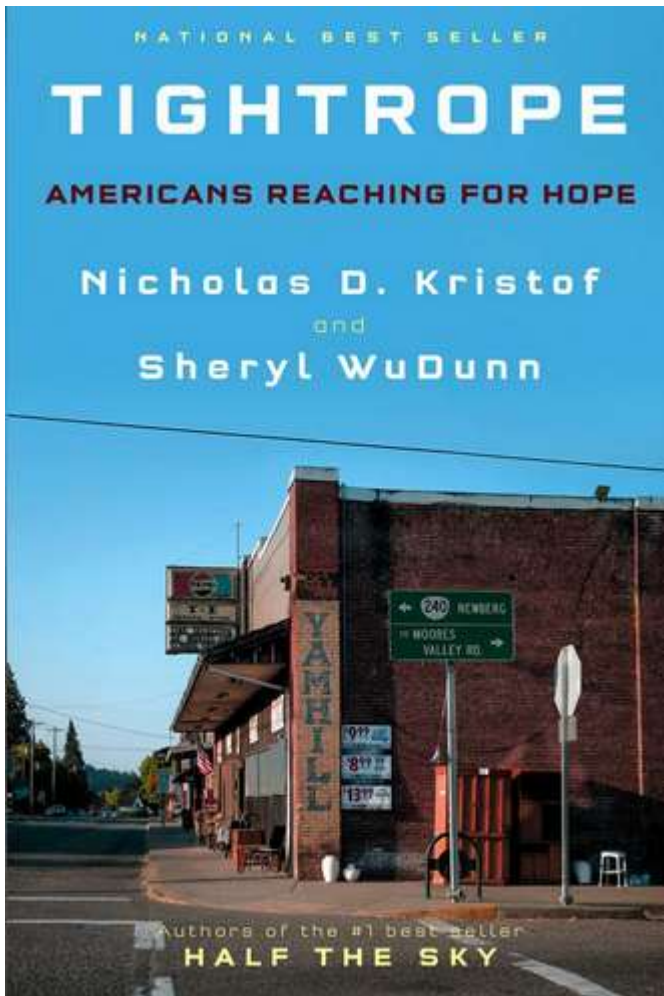


# Emotional Roller Coaster: Authors explore America's divisions

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*"Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope"* by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020, 320 pages, \$27.99 (hardcover).



“Half of all ZIP codes have less employment today than they did in 2007, while San Francisco, Seattle, Boston and New York are flourishing,” Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn observe in “When Jobs Disappear,” the third chapter in “Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope,” their new exploration on the struggles facing Americans in the 21st century. “Even more jobs may disappear in the coming years with the spread of artificial intelligence and machine learning. Truck drivers and cashiers, jobs that don’t require much education, could largely be replaced by automation.”

“The late economist Alan Krueger found that almost half of prime-age men not in the workforce take pain pills every day, and the majority say they are disabled or otherwise unable to hold a job,” they continue. “Many are like Kevin: poorly educated with criminal records, physically unhealthy, mentally unwell. And unhappy and lonely. Left and right may disagree about who is to blame, but fewer than one-third of Americans say in surveys that the country is headed ‘in the right direction,’ while large majorities say we’re ‘on the wrong track.’ When pollsters asked

Americans recently to offer a word to describe the times, among the top eight offerings were ‘worrisome,’ ‘chaotic,’ ‘exhausting,’ ‘hellish,’ and ‘hectic.’”

Initially, I did not consider this to be one of the more uplifting assignments I had undertaken in recent memory. That eventually changed – keep reading. The view Kristof and WuDunn present of contemporary life in the United States is not sugarcoated. The angst and bitterness many Americans are feeling these days drips from virtually every page of this depressing chronicle. At the heart of their dissertation is the unmistakable contention that what we are seeing unfold on a daily basis in primarily rural America is the direct result of several decades of bad policy decisions driven by a creeping yet unmistakable disdain for the heartland and those who have occupied it for generations. Our nation, by many standards, is more divided now than at any time since the Civil War. The authors shed some much-needed light on how we arrived at this point – and what we can do to reverse course before we reach the proverbial point of no return.

“Tightrope” is extensively researched, with 20 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 20 chapters that form the main narrative. The writing style is inherently accessible to a general audience; most readers will be able to instantly connect with many of the individuals, couples and families that populate the manuscript. I especially enjoyed the numerous photographs that serve to make the words come to life in a way that would not have been possible without their inclusion. I felt I could relate to the plight of many of those profiled in this fascinating dive into the current status of the so-called American Dream. Kristof and WuDunn do an exceptional job of capturing the essence of the daily lives of our friends and neighbors.

As usual, it was the personal stories of those profiled in the book that garnered most of my attention. In their research for “Tightrope,” the authors visited all 50 states and spent a significant amount of time with those who ultimately became the architecture upon which their thesis is built. “Raising Troubled Kids,” the 18th chapter, and one that really tugged at my heartstrings, was centered on the larger-than-life Annette Dove: “If America has a Mother Teresa, it’s Annette Dove, a 64-year-old woman in the struggling town of Pine Bluff, Ark. Once called ‘the most dangerous little town in America,’ Pine Bluff is mostly black and poor. Annette, an African American, stout and bustling with purpose, didn’t always have a sense of mission. She fell in love in high school – and then she was pregnant. She dropped out at 16 to marry her 17-year-old beau, who drove an ice cream truck. ‘I was head over heels,’ she remembers, but it didn’t last long. Her husband had come from a tough background and used drugs, and he struggled to hold on to jobs. He was domineering and became physically abusive.”

After leaving her husband to escape his abuse, she took her baby and tried to start over. For a while things were much better: “Annette earned a degree in special education and took a job as a teacher of disadvantaged kids in a public school, winning renown for her success in turning children’s lives around. Entry into her special education classes went from stigmatized to prized, and education officials took note. Annette married a much-loved parole officer, William Dove Jr., and they began helping kids in the community, even taking homeless kids into their own home.”

Then tragedy struck again: “Then one day, Annette couldn’t find her husband in the house. She walked through the rooms, calling his name – and found him dead in the bathroom, of a heart attack. She was devastated, emotionally and financially, but also reminded of her own mortality and life goals. So with three kids still in school, Annette quit her well-paying day job, found an old rotting house built in the 1800s that she gutted, and with the help of a man who donated lumber, windows and doors, together with her savings and some donated funds, she opened a nonprofit called TOPPS, for Targeting Our People’s Priorities and Services.” The rest of the chapter is devoted to the stories of the youth she has literally devoted her life to helping. Suddenly my life, which I have been pretty proud of on occasion, seemed pale by comparison.

Kristof and WuDunn are the first husband and wife writing team to share a Pulitzer Prize (1990) for journalism; they also won the prestigious Dayton Literary Peace Prize Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009. Kristof is an op-ed columnist for The New York Times, while WuDunn works in finance and consulting. They have collaborated on four previous books: “A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity,” “Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide,” “Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia” and “China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power.”

Although the primary purpose of “Tightrope” is to describe how many Americans are striving to overcome the challenges they had little responsibility for creating, I was reassured to find that some attention was given to what can be done to alleviate some of the anxieties they continually encounter. I was especially impressed with the Appendix included after the final chapter, “Ten Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes to Make a Difference.” (For example, No. 4: “Try supporting education for at-risk kids, especially in early childhood”). Contrary to the cynics among us, there are things we can all do to make the lives of those around us a little better – starting with

engaging in behaviors that strengthen the development of empathy and a stark realization that “there for the grace of God go I.”

If you want a real “feel” for what it’s like for many Americans in 2020 – one that goes beyond the stark headlines and sterile statistics, you really need to pick up a copy of “Tightrope.” Just be prepared; you’re in for an emotional roller coaster you won’t soon forget. Highly recommended.

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