harm’s way of—the drug-addicted abusers they would need to save. We can see Kristof and WuDunn trying to resist the nostalgia for the working-class families of yore. Tightrope opens with an appalling story of Yamhill neighbor Dee Knapp in 1973, cowering in the back fields of her house in the dark while her raging drunken husband shoots his rifle into the brush, trying to hit her. The authors chose this story, they say, to counter any charge of wishfulness for the old days, when families stayed together and the working class had cause for its purpose, self-respect, optimism. They know that those days were difficult for women, African Americans, Latinos, and “others who did not even have a seat at the table.” Nonetheless, as the book progresses, they seem to forget their own counsel.

Their conclusion, too, is contradicted by their own stories. Several central protagonists, such as Clayton Green or Farlan Knapp, were raised by two-parent families, but lived lives wracked by tragedy and ended up among the so-called “deaths of despair.” Kristof and WuDunn celebrate the story of Ke’Niya, the youngest of 17 children in a poor but stable family, but she becomes a single mother herself while still in high school, even though she is “managing her young family, holding a job and starting college.” To be clear, I am not arguing against this celebration. There is good evidence that for low-income women, children can actually serve not as a tragic misstep, but instead as both tether and witness, a spur to jobs and further schooling. Ke’Niya is an apt representation of this phenomenon. “Especially when I had my son, it’s like, okay, now you don’t have a choice but to make something out of yourself,” she tells them. But clearly, “family structure” is too blunt an instrument for analyzing Ke’Niya, Clayton, or Farlan.

Instead, I think we can look for answers in “social poverty”—defined in a much more limited way to mean a thinness of social ties and the obligations they carry—and its converse, call it “social abundance.” It’s not that Ke’Niya’s parents are married that makes the difference for her future, which I agree seems bright, despite her single-motherhood. Instead it is the fullness of the social world in which she is embedded, a richly textured world of reciprocity and need, of accountability and promise, all the words that convey the ways we can be braided together. While dense social networks often come with judgment and surveillance, they can also provide a thicket of social support that helps to fortify us.

The social poverty that plagues the working-class is in part internal to their communities: the fragmentation of families and relationships on which they can count—developments that certainly depend in part on material poverty, as well as scant jobs, spotty education, and an overeager criminal-justice system. (There is surely social poverty among affluent families as well, who are more likely to turn to the market to solve needs or problems.) But the concept of social poverty also allows us to talk about the changing definition of our communities in the first place: a large-scale shrinking from an “Us” to a “Them.”

The trouble with inequality is not simply the yawning chasm in material opportunities or outcomes that it generates, but also its cultural impact: the sense that our futures are not linked, that one group can bottom out without affecting the fortunes of the other. Tightrope can sometimes bolster the impression of a working-class America that is as distant as a foreign country. Kristof and WuDunn tell us that working-class men in the United States have the life expectancy of those in Sudan or Pakistan; that U.S. children living in “extreme poverty” would count as “extremely poor” even in Congo or Bangladesh; and that poor Americans have a homicide rate higher than their counterparts in Rwanda. The untold story here is the increasing sequestration of affluent people from the rest of the country, as schools, neighborhoods, even workplaces become increasingly segregated by class. Since the 1970s, the paths of these two Americas have diverged ever more widely. It is this divergence that makes the Yamhill stories unique, depicting a world in which different people connected not across the soup-kitchen counter or the courtroom, but across the fence.

Kristof and WuDunn might not employ “social poverty” in their analysis as much as I like, but their book, and its interweaving of the stories of their friends from Yamhill caught in the webs of misfortune, is an antidote to this sequestration, and thus deeply humane. “Whenever someone like Clayton dies an early death, whenever anyone falls from addiction, suicide, crime or despair, we all are diminished,” they write. And I believe them.

Allison Pugh ’88, author of The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity, is a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. She is writing a book about person-to-person work, technology, and the stratification of human contact.
He then trotted north, following the melodious notes of pine warblers near the Shakespeare Garden, and filmed the pert, bright-yellow birds flitting among dark conifers. Then he ran—“Nothing much to see in the interim”—to the reservoir for views of waterfowl, and happily documented the pied-billed grebe, with its “cute face,” and “the lone representative of its species that spent the entire winter there.” An excellent morning’s work, with plenty of field recordings to post for his 21,600 followers.

Barrett makes no money from his aggregating, crowd-sourced Manhattan Bird Alert and the others he has created for
eagle in a Riverside Park tree: “They do frequently perch in a tree to rest, although not, historically, in Manhattan.”

The work takes near-constant effort. The Manhattan account alone typically issues 30 posts a day, and close to 100 during busy migration seasons. Barrett built some of the software that drives his alerts (having studied math and computer science at Harvard and MIT, before earning an M.B.A at the University of Chicago), and devised the system to gather sightings and data from many sources, including Twitter, typically editing and re-posting the best ones.

Increasingly, though, he also features his own skillful photography and field videos, of waterfowl, and happily documented the

Barrett at a favorite birding site overlooking Turtle Pond, in Central Park, with Manhattan’s Upper East Side beyond
Brooklyn, Queens, and The Bronx. He does it to be “useful and active,” sharing his passion simply to “bring people joy. Birding is a healthful thing to do. It engages the mind, gets you outside, and gives you a workout, to the extent that you want it to. People seem to find looking at birds soothing during times of turmoil,” he adds, and he strives to keep the posts “positive, entertaining, and educational”: “Northern cardinal male singing from a sunlit perch”; “Great egret in hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond now”; “Fort Greene Red-tailed Hawks are hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond singing from a sunlit perch”; “Great egret in hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond singing from a sunlit perch”; “Fort Greene Red-tailed Hawks are hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond singing from a sunlit perch”; “Great egret in hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond singing from a sunlit perch”; “Fort Greene Red-tailed Hawks are hunting mode, Central Park’s Turtle Pond singing from a sunlit perch”;

Barrett restricts Coney Island—Barrett restricts himself to mastering Manhattan’s avian realm because it’s what he can do best. His 2013 book A Big Manhattan Year: Tales of Competitive Birding details that period and his 2012 quest to trounce other birders. Tallying 208 species, remarkable for a newcomer, he wrote of finishing second to “a vastly more knowledgeable and more skilled birder,” his friendly rival Farnsworth—who does not take Big Years too seriously. (He’s been birding since 1978 and has acute vision, along with high-end optical gear, “so it’s pretty easy to just look up and see things that other people are simply not clueing into.”)

In 2013, Barrett placed second again to Farnsworth, and launched the Manhattan Bird Alert. In 2014, concerned that his count would be surpassed, he ramped up efforts—landing with a comfortable victory, assured that “No one will try that anymore because they can see I’ll just do whatever it takes.” He says no amateur birder has since topped his annual counts, and he ended 2018, his last
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official Big Year, with the all-time record for Manhattan, 230 species.

That fall surge coincided with the arrival of an exotic male Mandarin duck, its painterly plumage making imperial waves among the common mallards on Central Park’s 59th Street pond (until it disappeared the following March). Thanks to Barrett’s doggedness and theatrical accounts—“The feisty MANDARIN DUCK often chases down and nips at the larger MALLARDS when they invade his space”—the East Asian native went viral as the “Hot Duck,” with Barrett sharing the limelight as its de facto agent. He “got in a bit of trouble” with some more conservative birding community members after a New York Times story mentioned his tossing tiny pieces of a soft salted pretzel into the water to attract the glamorous bird, but asserts, “I do not feed ducks bread products, and I do not advocate anyone else do it.” As he sees it, his alerts have inspired new fans and potential conservationists, especially among young people, by making time spent outdoors watching birds “cool.”

Birds are creatures of habit. Barrett’s encyclopedic arsenal includes research into those, as well as into species’ varying idiosyncrasies. He also studies ornithological science and methodically tracks weather and wind patterns, along with both historic and current reported sightings along migratory routes. These factors are now as useful to attracting Twitter followers as they were to his competitive birding.

Such goal-directed data-crunching is evident in all he does: his “day job” of managing his own money, for example, and his mining of computer science. Since 2016, he’s re-taken Harvard’s introductory course CS50, which he enjoyed as an undergraduate, online, and has earned certificates in artificial intelligence and as a Google Android developer, with plans to conduct his own research and projects. While studying classical singing in the early 2000s, he pushed himself to extend his range and reach high tenor notes in the “Che gelida manina” aria from La Bohème (and also loved to work on “Desperado,” by the Eagles). When not out birding, he learns online—natural science and computer science, mostly—and tackles mathematical challenges. Reading fiction has been a source of pleasure, as have a few broadcast series. “Bo Jack Horseman—a lot of fun! The Crown. And, of course, Sherlock. Excellent.”

But now he doesn’t have much time for television, or even trips to the grocery store. “I don’t like to waste time on things that are not essential,” he explains. “I just buy massive quantities of pasta and cereal, protein powder, bars. Something has to contribute to what I am trying to do...help me reach a goal. That’s the key.” He says he can easily correlate his spreadsheets logging years’ worth of fat, protein, and carbohydrate intake with those that track his weight loads and reps at the gym, to calibrate muscle versus fat gain.

Barrett recalls his years at Harvard fondly (“The hardest I ever worked!”), and in particular praises his math professors John T. Tate, Andrew Gleason, and David Mumford. By sophomore year he was in graduate-level courses, en route to applying to MIT’s doctoral program and planning a career as a mathematics professor. But he left MIT after passing his qualifying exam and ultimately focused instead on finance at Chicago, moving to New York City in 1992 to become a Wall Street mortgage trader when “mathematical approaches were revolutionizing the industry.”

Long ago, Barrett visited Britain, but says he’d never live outside Manhattan, and hasn’t left the borough for more than a few hours in at least a decade. Asked about those British tones, he explains it’s “an RP accent. RP British...received pronunciation.” He pauses, thinking, “Maybe it was the classical training I did in voice and speech that encouraged that. But I’ve always been fond of speaking, and accents in general. And I think some things become a choice: that if you like something over a long time, it eventually becomes part of your life.” He has friends within the birding community, and until COVID-19 arrived, sometimes joined guided groups in Central Park, because more eyes on the trees increases the odds of finding more birds. But for him, as for many others, birding is chiefly a solo pursuit, “because it is about the birds, not people.”

After spying the pied-billed grebe at the reservoir, Barrett reported that he pressed on along its north side and was surprised to find a horned grebe. Ordinarily such a rare bird—not seen in the park for two years, he said—would have quickly drawn observers. But after an hour, only a few fellow enthusiasts had arrived.

At home later, he was excited by an online report of a great horned owl at Inwood Hill Park. “They are solitary birds. They hunt alone, spend the day alone. And I think I feel some kinship with them,” he said. “I am a solitary person, and I like it, and I survive that way, too.” Ordinarily, he would have spent nearly an hour on the subway to see and photograph this favorite of his followers, but that didn’t seem like government-approved essential travel. Besides, in roaming Manhattan’s greenest corners, he’d already recorded dozens of owls, including eight different species.

Scrolling through his personal database to count and relay exactly which ones, he lit on an entry from January 11, 2014. He’d been alone at Randalls Island Park, an oasis between the Harlem and East Rivers. Scanning the sky, he noticed something among the soaring white sea gulls, something more compact flapping in a distinctly different style. It was a snowy owl. None had been spotted in Manhattan for 20 years, “and they come from afar, thousands of miles away,” he explained. “So it was unexpected, and simply beautiful and elegant, and right there. So I texted Farnsworth so he could come out and document it with me.” They were the only people out there that wintry day, the only two people to see the ethereal bird. It stayed for maybe 90 minutes, then flew away. Did they go celebrate? Barrett laughs. “No. Nothing like that. He just went back to his family, and I lingered awhile. There were other things I wanted to see. And then I went on my way.”