David Brooks: Gail, you made a reference in last week’s conversation that caught me up short. You said something about how badly my guys, the Republicans, have been behaving during this whole health care thing.

It made me wonder, are they really my guys? Do I have guys anymore?

Certainly in childhood I felt a strong affinity for the Democrats. Everybody I knew was one. The Democrats were obviously forces for justice and morality. Then sometime in adulthood I did come to naturally assume that the Republicans were the vehicles for the things I thought were best.

But you never know the workings of your own mind until you get an unexpected cold blast from somewhere deep inside. The thought that I’m part of the G.O.P.’s fan base sent such a blast, though it’s complicated.

The thought that I’m part of the G.O.P.’s fan base just gave me an unexpected cold blast, though it’s complicated.
At the moment, I feel politically closer to Barack Obama than to House Minority Leader John Boehner (and that’s even while being greatly exercised about the current health care bills). On the other hand, I feel politically closer to Lindsey Graham than to Henry Waxman.

I could draw a sort of hot and cold chart, with various people in my inner rings. In the Senate, I’d somehow cram Lamar Alexander, Susan Collins, Amy Klobuchar, Joe Lieberman, John McCain, Chuck Schumer, Mark Warner and Ron Wyden into my ring of most admired, along with several others.

The first message is that the Republicans have disenchanted me a great deal over the past few years. I’m more likely to think of myself as a conservative independent.

Second, I’ve come to think that mentality is more important than ideology when judging a politician. The people on that list have styles that somehow appeal.

Third, there is the repulsive force of teamism, which is the great corrupter in modern politics. It’s the way people crush their own personalities and views in order to fit in with the team.

Fourth, there is journalism. Even those of us in the opinion business have a duty to stay aloof from the players on the field.

Maybe this feeling of rootlessness is just a product of the conservative crack-up — the way moderate righties have been cast off with nowhere to call home. But I also notice that many people are growing less affiliated. The Pew Research Center has done fantastic polling on this phenomenon.

What do you think? Does any of this seem familiar in your milieu?

Gail Collins: David, I feel terrible about sending you off into this spiral of despair. I was just trying to have a lively back-and-forth and I wound up giving you an identity crisis. I hope the Republicans understand how deep a pit they’re in if you’re washing your hands of the team.
Fortunately, we don’t have to worry about not having things to argue about. I totally disagree with your conclusion that the best thing to do is say a plague on both your houses and I’m an independent.

I understand why that’s appealing. This is a country that celebrates individualism. To paraphrase that great American leader, Sarah Palin, only dead fish go with the flow.

Parties are necessary to create cohesion, to force people to vote with the group even when they aren’t happy about it.

But you can’t run a big, complicated country without parties. And if you want to run it with any degree of efficiency, those parties have to have enough cohesion to be able to force people to vote with the group even when they aren’t happy about it. Otherwise, you have little tiny clumps going this way and that, holding the whole process for ransom. And before you know it, you’re Italy. Or the New York State Senate, which is basically Italy minus all the charming people, beautiful scenery and good food.

Ideology is less important than mentality only if you’re judging a candidate on the basis of whether he or she will give good interviews after elected. There are a lot of politicians I totally disagree with who I admire as people. And I like talking to them because they’re smart enough to understand what’s actually going on and generous enough to share their insights.

But I would never vote to put them in power because they’d push the country in what I think is the wrong direction.

Democrats should have learned that lesson in the last election. They loved John McCain because the only times they really noticed him were the moments when he was bucking his party. Then he was nominated for president and they realized that he actually was a Republican, and that they disagreed with him about 75 percent of the time.
I like partisanship. What I don’t like, and what nobody likes, is the brain-dead variety we see in Congress where the minority party would rather make a bill worse in the hopes that it would fail than make it better in case it passes. So the Republicans make it impossible for the Democrats to put cost controls in the health care plan by howling “rationing!” And back when the Democrats were in the minority, they made sure that any attempt to contain the cost of entitlements was immediately branded “destruction of Social Security.”

The way you stop that is definitely not by declaring yourself an independent and leaving your party to the hard-core right that brought it to its current disastrous state. It’s by working from within. A conservative independent is just a Republican who’s had his heart broken, David. I think they need you.