

“Can Character and Communities Survive in an Age of Globalization?”
Hans Zeiger

In the small Midwest town where I attend college, globalization is occasionally rumored to be the culprit for the general malaise that hangs about. A vast grain mill sits in the center of the town, vacant, a monument to better days. The bad mood doesn't make it to campus much, but that only illustrates the disconnectedness with which the community is plagued. When a campus ministry recently sent letters to local pastors reporting on its progress, one pastor from a poor nearby farm town replied, “I didn't know that college was still around.”

To be sure, there is a rift between “town and gown,” and the local teenagers, too poor to afford the private college up the hill, tend to look for jobs in the lean market or go into the military or make their way to community college or trade school. Sadly, many teenagers turn to drug or alcohol abuse. Some grow dependent on welfare. Methamphetamines, child abuse, and abortion are all too common in this once-thriving farm and factory town.

There is a crudity about the local culture that is at once old-fashioned and apathetic. The flea markets and county fair look much the same as they may have fifty years ago, but the people have a less dignified sense of purpose together. They come together for the hobbies or the concessions or the tractor pull; old men gather at the local diner to watch Nascar; but the old links of family, church, and local institutions that worked in fine tune with the thriving blue collar economy half a century ago are mostly cracked.

The general concession to the name-branding of the town may be seen driving down the main road. McDonalds, Burger King, Rite Aid, Walmart, Pizza Hut, Subway—the standard scene in any American town. Local residents gave the award for best restaurant to none other than—Wendy’s. If the standard seems too low, the establishments themselves have low standards. One local fast food chain restaurant found itself unable to pass sanitary standards. Rather than clean up the mess, the restaurant closed and built a new location next door.

Is all of this the curse of globalization? That is certainly a major part of it, but the global economy is shifting, and my college town has yet to move beyond the first phase of globalization to the next one. If globalization has weakened community and character, it need not remain that way.

In the past several years, a major transformation of the global economy has been underway. It is a shift away from uniformity toward diversity and particularity. Not since the late 1990s has popular culture been a phenomenon of Madison Avenue and Hollywood engineering; in that time for the high school freshman the radio, CD player, and television were still fashionable. Today it is the XM radio, the iPod or the MP3, and YouTube that have arisen in their place, affording options far more numerous than old media ever did. Most of the fifty bestselling music albums were released in the 1970s or 1980s; none were released in the past five years.¹ As Chris Anderson writes in a new book about the internet economy, “Our growing affluence has allowed us to shift from being bargain shoppers buying branded (or even unbranded) commodities to becoming mini-connoisseurs, flexing our taste with a thousand little indulgences that set us apart

¹ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 2

from others.”² This proliferation of specialty markets and tastes through the Internet produces a revolution of relationships also, according to Anderson. “Rather than being loosely connected with people thanks to superficial mass-cultural overlaps, we have the ability to be more strongly tied to just as many if not more people with a shared affinity for niche culture.”³

But this raises an issue more troubling than the issue of the television age. At least then, in spite of Mr. Rogers, it was obvious that we could not make friends through the television screen. After we have ceased to follow local news because we only hear the global news on the niche satellite radio station, after we have left the office job to become a satellite employee, after we have made our detached, satellitic associations in two hundred Facebook groups, will there be anything left for us to unite upon in real life? Will we perceive any reason to join a real church or to attend a real college or to work for real customers with whom we interact face-to-face? Will we still have faces when no one can know whether they are really our faces, or only the PhotoShop creations that appear on our “profiles”?

There are reasons to doubt that we are a morally imaginative people. Had we moral imagination, the Internet phase of globalization would be checked. We would see the claims of beauty on our souls, and we would seek out beautiful things, to stand quietly and listen to the sounds of creation, to make a home where our children are loved and taught, to join with the local community in its feasts and festivals and to help the less fortunate, to belong to that other community of souls in a church, where reverence for the divine paints in the other priorities of existence. But if imagination is dulled, and if our

² Anderson, 11

³ Anderson, 191

sense of belonging is covered over by a sense that all belongs to us, we will not likely lift ourselves from the infinitude of a Google browser. All is there, including satellite pictures of the earth and the scanned pages of earth's books.

We ourselves become satellites when the bonds of community no longer hold us. We beam back from time to time to survive, but we no longer feel as if our life depended on the community—or that parts of it depended on us. As Richard Weaver observed after moving from his ancestral town in North Carolina to Chicago, “people existing together in one geographical spot do not necessarily comprise a community.”⁴

And yet we need not be pessimists. This present economic transition is not the first. Community, despite changes, has had a way of surviving and resurfacing when least expected, because community is a need of the soul. Aristotle teaches that we are social and political animals, more than even the gregarious bees.⁵ When God made Adam, He declared, “It is not good that man should be alone.”⁶ The combination of global markets with local communities may seem nearly impossible to people who spent the greater part of their lives before the commercial introduction of the Internet in 1991, but the combination may not seem so strange to the rising generation. Young people in the West are desperately seeking authority, even while they update their MySpace account, check up on Instant Messenger, and view the Drudge Report.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet distinguished between power and authority. Power is force; authority is voluntary, and it is compelling. It is the difference between the state and the family.

⁴ Richard Weaver, “Address of Dr. Richard M. Weaver, Chicago University,” from *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 9

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 28

⁶ Genesis 2:18, New King James Version

What place have power and authority in the rising generation?

Status quo power is held in general disfavor. Young Americans are familiar with the power of divorce, the power of peer pressure, the power of Columbine, the power of drugs, the power of sex, the power of 9/11. It is not power that raises the longings of youth. We have seen its horrors, so we turn away. Thus the old bastions of power, the establishments, are aging and dying. Harvard and Yale and Princeton lack the prestige they once had, since today's intellectuals are more scattered and today's students have more options. ABC, NBC, and CBS, and USA Today and the New York Times, face a sudden and threatening competition from the blogs, and cable news, and talk radio. The Freemasons don't seem to be pledging a youthful membership. Mega churches and mega pop stars and mass movements are out of vogue in the rising generation.

We seek meaning over power, and only by an appeal to authority will we find meaning.

Sadly, the authority of the family, of the church, of the local community is weakened. The consequent vacuum has been filled by a vain consumerism driven by pop cultural gurus and marketers. We rushed to it over and over again—from the Beatles to Britany Spears— though it never satisfied our deepest needs. For the satisfaction of those needs, the exertion of energy may have come as a momentary thought, but then it faded with the fading of the institutions that would otherwise have kept before us our object.

The more immediate desire of today's young, the principle of the new economy as well as culture that is opening like a desktop window on a screen before our eyes, is to experience diversity in life—to really make a choice rather than be told by a powerful chart consultant what our choice will be.

The post-1960s youth culture was not exactly a free market in the noblest sense. Suddenly available were cultural media unknown to previous generations that would require methods of diffusion, and a marketing industry could roll in the millions by enchanting millions of teenagers with rock or hip hop. Only now, with the Internet, is it possible for supply to meet demand so precisely. Thus the MTV Generation is over.

Free markets respond to demands, and if the demand for distinction is made, the supply will follow. As in music and movies and magazines, so in computers and colleges and cars: choice is the future.

The new market will inevitably make itself known in the halls of government, which as a bureaucratic state has been friendly neither to free markets or local community. In the last century, a fear of economic competition and choice animated government to exceed its bounds; government moved to restrict trade, to tax businesses, to regulate industries, even to monopolize in its own hands particular industries and social services (public schools, for example) that public planners felt could best be done by them. All of this had no small role in the decision of businesses to shut factory doors, or not to innovate because taxes were too high, or not to make the personal investment in the careful education of a child. Against this philosophy of scarcity he saw growing in his nineteenth century France, Frederic Bastiat offered a simple proposition: “Wealth consists in an abundance of commodities.”⁷

For the first time to such an extent, a rising generation of entrepreneurs, thinkers, and cultural leaders understands that proposition. Variety is worth having, and it is worth creating. The possibilities for exchange multiply; wealth is created not only at home but

⁷ Frederic Bastiat, “Abundance and Scarcity,” from *Then Truth Will Out* by Leonard E. Read, (Irving-on-Hudson, NY: Foundation for Economic Education, 1971), 163

globally, and quickly there transpires the global marketplace that made *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman declare in a book title, *The World is Flat*. Worldwide, the opportunities to exercise one's own particular talents and skills in the service of a particular market, reachable through the Internet, are expanded. On the flipside of choice, men and women increasingly feel the joys and the burdens of ownership.

Because choice requires duty. Personal responsibility, lately diminished by the rise of the bureaucratic state and scoffed at by the liberationists of the late 1960s, has hope for a comeback. As William Graham Sumner wrote in 1883, "the duty of making the best of one's self individually is not a separate thing from the duty of filling one's place in society, but the two are one, and the latter is accomplished when the former is done."⁸ Free markets and communities operate on the same principle: from them we benefit, to them we contribute.

It is the idea of the Golden Rule: that we must give to others as we would have them give to us.

Which is the key to the renewal of our communities. If we would have a sense of common purpose, of creating good things and serving a higher cause together in a particular place, we may find it on the rising wave of globalization. In my little college town, for instance, a victim of globalization of an outmoding (and outsourcing) kind, globalization of the new kind would prove wondrous. Rather than despairing about lost jobs, lost youths, and the social ills brought on by welfarism, opportunity is live. And not only for small Midwestern farm and factory towns is globalization good news, so too for broken inner cities ridden with crime and drugs. According to a 2006 survey by the

⁸ William Graham Sumner, "On the Value, as a Sociological Principle, of the Rule to Mind One's Own Business," from *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, (US: Harper and Brothers, 1920), 113

entrepreneurial education group Junior Achievement, 70.9 percent of 1,474 middle and high school students would like to be self-employed sometime in life.⁹

As well, the dangers of the global era are high. With expanded economic potentials for the entire world comes the strong chance that an unexpected ascendant will take reins and undo American superiority. China is burgeoning, India is a force, even the Third World may be expected to change and develop more rapidly in the oncoming economy. Here in the United States, immigration from Mexico and Latin America poses questions, beyond the immediate questions of illegal immigration, about the nature of American cultural identity and whether assimilation is still possible. Far more appalling than the crisis at the American Southern border is the jihad of the Muslim world on the continent of Europe. Facing a negative birthrate among native Europeans, immigrant Muslims from the Middle East are reproducing quickly and opening the very real specter of a culture clash more violent far than the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been.

Against these possibilities the communities of the West must fortify. By raising and educating our children, helping the poor, holding membership in a church or synagogue, contributing to local philanthropic efforts, mentoring, and serving, the character and spirit of communities will heal and shine. At the same time, local businesses stand to gain from globalization. The trends toward “McDonaldsization” and “Disneyization” that fascinated a generation of sociologists are at their end, and the new trend is not only globalism but also localism. For those enterprises that cannot operate

⁹ Jeffrey Gangemi, “Young, Fearless, and Smart,” *Business Week*, http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/oct2006/sb20061030_754921.htm?chan=top+news_top+news+index_top+story, Oct. 30, 2006

primarily on the Internet, and many there are—the distinct and the local may be perfect complements to the global realities of their setting.

In this age, leadership must come from men and women of conservative disposition who understand the delicacy of the balance between the local and the global. Conservatives must go to the marketplace, not only to push ideas, but to spark imagination—in the realms of film, higher education, law, the arts, parenting. We must use the stage of the Internet to spread truth. Alexander Solzhenitsyn quoted an old Russian proverb in his 1970 Nobel speech: “One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.”¹⁰ Thus it is that against a barrage of information swelling into the mind of our contemporaries, the truth of what T.S. Eliot and Russell Kirk called “the permanent things” will stand out.

In the very shift of economy that we sense in multimedia all around us, we can locate signs of hope that the permanent things will regain vibrancy. Little old towns like the one where I attend college can enjoy dignity they’ve lost to a previous era of globalization. Character and community are not dead; they may soon prove to be fine complements to a global marketplace.

¹⁰ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “Nobel Lecture,” in *Nobel Lectures: Literature, 1968-1980*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 1993), 46