

A New Economy for a New Era: Community vs. Consumption.

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I am honored to engage you at your annual meeting and am grateful to the leaders of The Interfaith Alliance of Rochester by the way if you made it TIA of Rochester Area your acronym could be TIARA but that may not be the identity you are looking for! My family and I are grateful to come into the Rochester community that has a history of depth and width in transformative organizational diversity and vision. There must be something in the water in this area often referred to as the Burned over District.

My father was an economist, and I am not. I have, however, been interested in the area as a student of social analysis almost all my life. My use of the term economy for our engagement today will be more heuristic and less financial since it seems like an emblematic trope to explore the changing paradigms of our time. I must confess that this is not meant to be a primarily academic engagement as much as it is a stirring up of a pot of soup. Hopefully something savory will show up for everyone.

Let me begin with an identification that we are in a state of transition of paradigms into a postmodern era. Modernity as we know it brought a sense of movement in societies across the world engineered by economies that sustained the enterprises that were being created, or nurtured by modernity. Chief among the catalysts that prompted the modern era was the Enlightenment, which brought to the center of most discourses the aspect of reason. The Enlightenment, which prompted varying degrees of engagement with cultural, social, economic and religious presuppositions, led to the Industrial Revolution that provided the framework for most of life in the 19th and 20th centuries.

We are currently in the transitional phase of what sociologists, cultural anthropologists, artists, and economists have been calling the postmodern era. It has, most assuredly, been in a formative stage overlapping with the modern era for a while; some would say, since World War II. So there you have it: Modernity and Post-modernity. The simplest description I have heard about the distinction between Modernity and Post-modernity is this. The modern era is like a lovely tea cup and the postmodern is like a broken tea cup. The former is structured and contained. The latter is not so much a structure with form as it is a suspended mosaic. This postmodern culture, while not anti modernity, offers a different paradigm affecting modernity's presuppositions.

If Modernity, especially in the western world, was fed by the frenzy of consumerism, individualism, and a culture of cutthroat competition, the postmodern era by itself does not reduce the frenzy. In fact, it conceivably exacerbates the frenzy because of its propensity to seek individual or group gratification often determined as essential identity. However, the postmodern world has called to question some of the presuppositions of the modern era. For instance, the place of centralized authority and normative identity national or denominational has been selectively challenged in the postmodern era. This is evident for instance in the fact that mainstream religion is on the decline. Civic religion, which was founded on notions of centralized authority and denominational identity, has been rejected as irrelevant, hypocritical, and of little consequence to the postmodern person.

Such challenging of authority and norm has provided the impetus to many reform and spiritualist movements including the this worldly abolitionist and suffrage movements to the other worldly

kind of burned over ones in our backyard. The latter included the Latter Day Saints, the Millerites, and the séances of the Fox sisters. In a collective conscience sense they were in some ways forerunners to the Civil Rights, Feminist, and Womanist movements, as well as the movements of global human rights impacting people with different sexual orientations, invisible people like the elderly, people with disabilities, migrant farm workers, etc.

The postmodern era has helped nurture the idea of diverse identities that seem messier than the orderly teacup of modernity. But a storm has been brewing in the metaphoric teacup and has presented some challenge to status quo, eventually breaking the teacup into a mosaic of individual identities. The problem is that in the process of deconstructing normative structures of modernity we are left with more substructures fostering alienation, tribalism, terrorism, and the like. Therefore, it is vital that a new era that engages community move toward an evolving understanding of community, family, club, or any other social conglomerate. Such an understanding would have to be intentionally non-hegemonic while inviting some accountability so that difference or otherness is not just for the sake of difference or otherness. This is possibly one of the emerging roles for faith traditions. There is need for us to retool or reformate our seminal or core values of compassion, justice, tranquility, goodness, works of mercy, love, sister-brotherhood, etc.

In our current global economic context we have an opportunity, wherever appropriate, to confront our obsession with greed. When will the economy bounce back? is perhaps an important expediency question, but How will we confront our greed? is a spiritual one for people of all faiths. Most people agree that greed is what got our corporate economic freight train to run amuck in the first place.

†While regulatory strictures are important preventative considerations to keep corporate greed under check, the radical evidence of greed running amuck needs our attention NOW. Our President's call to engage the question of equity in our system of education and health care is arguably as good a place as any to start this engagement with greed. How we treat the most vulnerable people in our community is a benchmark to understand our greed.

Greed is greed in any economy. India, for instance, during this time of international recession is facing not as much of a challenge, in the percentile graph, as the rest of the world. This situation is mostly attributed to India's retail industry, which has been robust and continues that way because most products made or grown in India are sold in India. The market is vibrant when demand and production are mostly domestic. Interestingly, it is the underclass that makes up a big chunk of this market. Without the lower castes and the Dalits (untouchables) participating in this economic matrix, India's economy, I imagine, would be in worse shape than it is. Therefore, it would serve India (and the world) well to ensure that such communities, which have been historically excluded from mainstream privileges such as quality education and health care, are seen as stake holders and invited to share equitable opportunities. This would model a process of building communities that look more like the beloved community we all seek. Such a move would be a remarkable departure from corporate greed and lead to greater equity, safety and a shared sense of evolution as an interdependent human community.

The choice between consumption and community has to do with an essential engagement or confrontation with personal and corporate greed.

Consuming is not buying what you need. It is not even buying what you want. Consumerism propels the insatiable belief that we need what we do not have. It is a way of being in the world,

a fundamental frame of reference for relating to oneself, to others, and to the environment as a whole. (Un-TV and the 10 Mph car: Experiments with Personal Freedom and Everyday Life, by Bernard McGrane)

Fusion is an important metaphor for wholesome community: the need to discern that some of our most beautiful gifts are discovered in our commonalities. Fusion in our foods, in our music, in art, in architecture gives us some traction to seek more and more fusion in our common life. Ancient epistemologies that claim the preponderance of one solution or one way are increasingly draconian. They are also possibly a good indicator of remnant modernity. Fusion invites a different value in that it seeks to create a good out of a collaborative, communal effort.

A word from the Bantu language of South Africa pulls this concept of community together well. The word is UBUNTU: I am because you are. In the words of Desmond Tutu, A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

In this increasingly postmodern world where difference is valued, we need to also value our sense of community because without it we will wallow in a new sort of monasticism glorifying our techno-pods. If we are not careful we will live into a global prison with no walls where we are connected to each other though our cell phones. Our technological brilliance is a gift that has to be monitored for our common good. Without some intentional monitoring we will end up living, you in your cell and I in mine. If we are not careful, Tagore's words from the forties will still ring true: where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. Change, of course, has to begin with you and me before it can truly impact systems. This change has to be built on some transcendent assumption. We are made to love people and use things. We have normalized using people and loving things.

Let me conclude by saying that, I think, the most important element in our pursuit for a new economy that places community and not consumerism at the center is what I like to call the absorption factor. It is a crucial factor for any one who wants to be a part of the solution. The following words have been attributed to Kent Keith and Mother Teresa.

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Be good anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People need help, but may attack you if you try to help them.

Help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.

Our major religions point to people who pursued a wholesome peace. People like Mohammed, Hagar, Bahallah, Rama, Sita, Jesus, Mary, Abraham, and Sarah. Whatever the name of the pursuer of peace, we have a dire need for individuals to enter the transcendent and inaugurate a new economy that values the best aspects of community. Let us invite our better angels to come out and dance.