

CULTURAL DISCOURSE

The cultural process is my favorite arena of the social process. I spent a lot of time in schools and colleagues dealing with physical anthropology, studying different kinds of animals. We explored mating patterns, different kinds of eggs, and all the names of different fossils -- a fascinating subject. One amazing thing I discovered was that it seems as though all sorts of animals participated in some kind of economic process. They were all anxious to sustain themselves whether they killed other creatures or whether they grazed in the fields. However it was, they sustained their lives. Perhaps their distribution scheme was somewhat reduced and selfish by human categories, but they were sustained by a kind of economic process. Many of them participated in a political process as well. We spent months looking at the social organization of ants. They have groups and leaders that rotate. They also protect each other. We studied the ways bees organize each other and create a primitive polity dynamic.

But when we got to the cultural process, there was not much you could say about how the animals would go about transmitting their wisdom, trying out their style, or living out of symbols. As far as we could tell that cultural process was a human process. It had to do with the way that human beings, for centuries, for thousands and thousands of years, have decided to go a step further. For human beings, in addition to sustaining themselves and organizing themselves, put meaning on that sustaining and on that organizing activity. Human beings must articulate the significance of the life they find themselves in the midst of. They must stand apart in order to reflect on and illuminate what is going on in life. These are all ways to describe the function that this cultural process plays in the midst of life.

Within the cultural, in the arena of Wisdom, we pass on the images we have developed as a people: images of how life is lived, images of what life is about. The whole educational structure is included there, as well as useful skills such as using a spoon and other more sophisticated skills.

And then in the arena of Style, you see the way in which the whole community organized itself, how we organize our social groups; how you know somebody who is in this community, as distinct from someone in the community next door. What kinds of roles-we play are also a part of that arena of style which is in the cultural.

Finally, there exists the arena of Symbol or those cultural expressions which hold the meaning of life. There need to be rites, rituals, and symbols like the flag, which hold up these meanings. It seems that this process we humans dreamed up is rather special. We have had a great deal of success with our cultural process over the centuries. He have managed to go from Cro-magnon man, when we were so unsophisticated that all we could figure out was the means to bury our dead. We are not even sure we had language then but we did manage to invent a fantastic diversity of languages by which we could communicate. We developed ways to communicate, not only through speaking, but with our hands, with our writing, and other symbols of all sorts and shapes.

We created ways to organize ourselves in groups to hold the diversity of the kinds of families we created. We figured out utterly different ways to organize our communities. We created the great religions in history to stand present to the awe and mystery that struck us in life. And we built fantastic synagogues, temples and churches to stand present to the events of man's spirit. We built incredible systems of Wisdom and ways to communicate it, exhibiting incredible sophistication in the way we could articulate what goes on in life in all its aspects. We did such a good job that in the 20th century the economic process accelerated tremendously. We had every kind of skill such that we did not have to spend time, and for some of us, a lot of our time, doing other things. We made that cultural process an incredible wonder. We made our civilization an in credible wonder. And by the twentieth century our wisdom was so unbelievable that our forms were describing the meaning of our time. Our language for describing our ways of relating to each other in the midst of our times was, however, rather puny next to the wonder of civilization itself. We created ways of relating to each other that worked beautifully when we could get together in a little town with no more than about a hundred of us together. We created fine ways to relate to each other in that context. But when we built massive, glorious, complex cities our modes of relationship did not work quite so well as before. You could not make friends with the guy at the A and P counter the way you used to be able to make friends with the guy back at the General Store. Our means of making relationships just did not

work because our cities were so big, fantastic, complex and diverse. Our values, our ways of holding the mystery of life itself were puny and thin next to the kind of mystery that began to break loose in the midst of our lives. We created a whole atomic cloud, the ability to destroy life itself, as well as create it, as well as feel it. And we had no way to stand present to the mystery that was afoot, even in the midst of our own creation. In the midst of that kind of failure of our cultural process, the economic was there. It had a kind of vitality and life in it, that could just step into these processes and fill in content. You wanted to know what education was about, when Mc Guffey's Reader did not hold it any more? Hell, it told you: you can get a good job -- if you get an education. And if you get a more and more technical education, you get a more and more lucrative job. You want to know what the family is about when you are not quite clear anymore? Well, support your family. What kind of home do you plan to have? The economic was there with vitality to fill in the process. The economic was there to fill in even our symbols to give us ways to understand life. Since 1960, there have been, something like ten thousand words added to the English language in common usage, and about nine and a half thousand of those are technological terms for different kinds of technical processes that have been invented. The economic was there with content to fill in when our ways of articulating meaning folded.

For instance, you would wake up in the morning and it was not like the meaning had gone out of life, there was meaning there and it was fine. It just got a little embarrassing. Sometimes you would wake up in the morning and say to yourself, or whatever, I don't remember why I was supposed to get up today. And sort of metaphorically, you would look at your value screen that would remind you why you were supposed to get up, and your value screen would say something like "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise!" And you would say, "Oh, that's right. and get up and trot off to work. That's the way it is supposed to be. Then you might ask, "Why did I want to be healthy, wealthy, and wise?" What is it that my life was out to do that made being healthy, wealthy, and wise necessary? And if you ask your value screen that, not a lot comes back.

It just sits there, like a parrot. And it is in that context that we began to encounter in the twentieth century the collapse of our values. It was not some horrible screaming crisis, it was just that three out of five marriages in some states in this country end up in divorce. Or a youth has had no way to celebrate being twenty-one except voting, if he wanted to, and drinking. These were the ways to celebrate becoming an adult. If an incident like Watergate calls into question the values of traditional political systems, people say, "Well, that is all you can expect. That is the way politicians operate."

There was no real shock there, but it was clear that the foundation of our social structure was not quite solid. Or you had teachers whose whole lives were given to teaching, except in Chicago, where if it took two or three weeks to get the salary they wanted then teaching was no longer the top issue. The issue became the paycheck. It became clear that our ability to articulate the meaning of life did not carry the issue that life was raising.

The place where it strikes me most concerns what I do with my time. The way to articulate the purpose of my life. And my struggle here was when that value screen and that cultural process began to collapse and the economic assumed the power that it did, we simply had no way to do the human job of saying what was meaningful in our lives; of saying what was significant; of getting any kind of distance on our engagement to sustain it. There was no way to get distance on my job in order to say what was human about me that nine to five did not necessarily fulfill. I will never forget having a conversation with my dad when he was recounting that some 'liberal' kid in the neighborhood had come into his grocery store and had been giving him a hard time about how all he wanted was the good life. And he would say 'no, that is not true,' and the kid said that all he really saw as meaningful in life, all he would really give his life for, was his store, his house, and his car. And my dad said, 'well, that is not true, I would give my life for great things,' and apparently the kid said that as far as he could see, the way that my father had spent the last thirty years of his life and planned to spend whatever life he had left, was precisely for the sake of his house, his car, and his store. That it was the way he was spending his time. And that came to my dad, and it came to me, upon reflection, as a horrifying kind of fact. Not only was that what he was saying, but the fact was that neither of us had anything in particular that would say 'oh, but I am giving my life for X, even if I do spend my time this way.' You just found yourself trapped in a life that you had no particular intention of being, that you had no particular ill-will toward the world, no particular passionate craving or avarice for the good life, and for making people starve to death on your fat-cat ways. It was just that, that was the way life was; there just was not any other particular way to say what was going on.

That is the struggle with values we all have. And it is not that there is anything particularly naughty about that. It struck me recently that someone was saying it was so good that we had gotten out of Vietnam, because it was so unjust, wicked, killing people over there, but now that we had gotten out, we were not killing people over there anymore. It was fine we got out, because we were so naughty while we were over there. And somebody pointed out in that conversation you could be naughty either by staying over there and killing people, or by getting out of there and letting people kill each other. The issue was hardly naughtiness. The issue was your relationship to the world. How is it that you come to terms with your participation in the world? It is bigger; it is more complex than your story about naughtiness was created to deal with.

Even in the midst of that kind of crisis in our values, you see people ignoring it. You see people showing up and going on living a new style. It shocks me, the struggle with motivity, with 'how can we get people motivated?' -- in this country. In Africa you see tiny countries suddenly pick up one day and decide to be a nation. They are experimenting with a new kind of political form that is not particularly communism, but something new designed to deal with their particular needs. That sort of style breaks loose in the midst of this crisis in values. The breakloose in style in youth over the past ten years has come to me that way. There were not values telling them whether it was right or wrong to do what they were doing. They just decided to step out and assume a different kind of a role, in the lives of all around the world, than had been seen before. No matter what you say about Vietnam, they have decided that the world will deal with their future. It is like this little bitty nation just sat down on its haunches and said, "We are going to create our future, if it takes fifty years, and if it takes fighting with each other and with you and with everybody else, all that time, we are going to deal with our future, and you are just going to have to deal with us." And France came along and tried to deal with it, and the United States came along and tried to deal with it, but they just kept going on dealing with their future, regardless of other people's worries.

An incredible kind of decisionality is happening in our time where people, even in the midst of having all their stories cut off, somehow manage to go on. I ask myself, "What is going on there? How do people dare to do that? What are they telling themselves to be able to continue that way?" I suppose it has something to do with just the way life is for life does not tend to let you go around without having made up your mind about it. When I first came to Chicago from California, where they don't have subways, I decided I was going to ride the subway. I did not know my way around at all, but I was confident that I could one way or another. I had a little map, which I found out later was very outdated, but I got on the subway and got off at what I thought was the Loop. I came up above ground, and it was not the Loop. What I wanted to do was sit down and decide what it was, and why it wasn't the Loop, where the Loop was in relation to it, and what I was going to do. I discovered, however, within about two seconds, that it was in fact a ghetto and I would not be wise to spend a lot of time there figuring out where I was. I just had to make up my mind how to deal with it and get myself out of there. I find life comes to you that way, relative to your values. It doesn't suspend the decisions you have to make simply because you are not quite prepared to deal with them today or tomorrow, or the next day, simply because you haven't figured out the theoretics yet -- it just keeps asking you questions. And I suspect that as you are answering those questions, you keep creating new universes.

I have a friend from Seattle who spent the last three years in Japan! I went out to dinner with him and some other people the other night, and he was apologizing for continually forgetting how women are supposed to go in first through doors. He said that was because in Japan women always follow; the social structure was such that men always go first through things, and women always follow. Then he said another thing that really struck me, which was that women always received bills in a restaurant because, in the traditional samurai image, money was below what a samurai would deal with. At restaurants they still always give the check to a woman even if the woman happens to be your ten-year-old daughter. It struck me that Japan was a different universe than I had ever lived in. I started thinking of the difference it would make in the ways I usually operate, always being the one that receives the check. I may always be the one that pays for the check now, but I am not given it! It is a different kind of a universe that Japan has decided to create than the one that I live in in the West. I do not know exactly how they created it, but it is clear that they did not sit down one day and say -- "Now, you know, in the West they give the checks to man, and you know how we are different from the West -- probably what we should do is switch around." I am sure they did not do that. I am sure it was like somebody -- the guy at the restaurant had to decide who to give the check to, and the guy in the West decided to put it down in front of the man, and in Japan he happened to put it in front of the woman.

That is the way you begin to create the universe around you, whether you do that self-consciously, or unconsciously, in response to the situation that 'life raises, the kind of questions that you get asked by history. That kind of struggle I would talk about under the category of rationality. Now, in the West we do that a lot by reason. But I guess there are other ways of doing it. Probably dance and art forms are ways of creating rationality that other nations use more heavily than we have in Western civilization.

The process however is the same. It is the process of doing the human job of figuring out how the meaning in life is going to operate for a generation, for a century, how there are going to be symbols in history, and how we are going to go about reflecting on what happens to us. You know when you begin to reflect self-consciously the issue is, "What is the appropriate response to the situation that I find myself in?" Every response I make to a situation is creating something of the universe, or the universe of meaning that is going to create the new world, which is the new complexity we find ourselves in the midst of in the twentieth century. Every decision I make about how women operate creates the way that women will operate in the twentieth century, simply because there is no other way for women to operate. New women and men are created and the old ways of operating need some adjustment.

We are clear in raising children that with the tiny world we have, the issue of where a child goes to school is not only an issue of your neighborhood, it can be an issue of the nation, or of the whole world. Given the financial possibilities available, and the transportation available, why would not a child go to high school a Japan - - since they given women the checks there! Why wouldn't he go to school in Japan or South America? That kind of decision once opened to you, as it is in our time, raises the issue of how the universe will be. If you decide to send your child to a high school down the street, then you have decided particular things about the way that people are going to deal with the smallness of the world. They will stay in their neighborhood in relation to that world. And that is just the way our decisions show up. Simply because the kind of world we have got on our hands is so demanding and complex and new ways are demanded to deal with our lives.

Since we have had our son, I was struck by the universe of possibilities we have been given in raising him. For example, how would we advise him about his vocation. If I were to tell him to get a good job that he could spend forty years in as a significant vocation, it dawned on me that five years after he had gotten that job and the whole field had shifted on him, he would realize that he did not have a significant vocation as he went to another job. Were I to tell him that significant vocation was a forty-year job, he would never have a chance to realize such a vocation. He will never see the significance in his vocation. We find ourselves making that kind of decision every day. If I say that a meaningful relationship is the kind of intimate relationship that you can have in a rural world, when you live in a small group and you know people, if I say that is what meaningful relationships are, most people in the world will never have meaningful relationships, because most people in the world will never have a chance to live in such a situation. They will always find themselves living in an urban milieu. And the universe I create is the universe that I find myself in from moment to moment as I decide what to do with my life.

The question is, "How do you create a universe that corresponds with your real world? It is a matter of creating myths, or stories about life. Even as I talk here, even as you are taking notes, or eating your dinner, or taking a shower, is being created the new universe of meaning that we will live in around us. Now that universe is beginning to surface in certain ways.

It is clear, for instance, that universe or that myth or that story, has something to do with the way life comes to everybody as just Care. Life comes to everybody as just Care. You remember Coca-Cola used to say that they were the pause that refreshes? I bought Coca-Cola because they seem to be people who are very sensitive, so I like to examine what they are looking for in their customers. They decided up until about five years ago that people were looking for a pause that refreshes, and they sold a lot of Coke through those advertisements. Apparently, they hit a point where that slogan was not selling Coke any longer. People had stopped looking for a pause that refreshes. And people apparently started looking for 'the real thing.' Coca-Cola has done very well selling what they call 'the real thing.' Then lately they decided that people were looking for something new. Did you see that television commercial with the children from across the world, all lined up on a hill, and they are singing 'I'd like to tell the world to sing in perfect harmony' (and buy coke, they add somewhere). Coca-Cola has been staking its bank-roll, sizable thing that it is, on the belief that where people are operating today is something about care for children across the globe and something about creating harmony. That concern is so deeply in us that even Coca-Cola says humanness has something to do with caring.

Another part of being the emerging story that is already in the midst of us is the Freedom, not that we have, but that we are. Youth are my illustration here, in the extent to which they will not ask permission to experiment with their lives. They are clear that no matter what style emerges, they are free to experiment. Their lives are their own. That awareness is beginning to break loose.

And then, I want to include the Mystery in the midst of our lives. There was a news item for instance about having measured the ends of the universe. They measured the edges of the universe. That did not strike me the first time I read it. Then five people came up to me that day and said, "did you hear? They measured the edges of the universe!" and it dawned on me that that came to people as an incredibly significant event. And they were not people who would be interested in it as astronomers, but people for whom that news item revealed the fascination with space. We find ourselves fascinated with space for the reason that space reveals the mystery that is all around us.

Finally, Fulfillment is in the midst of our lives as well. I do not wait for someone to dub me and say, "Now my dear, you have fulfilled the meaning of your life." -- I decide that my life is fulfilled or not. My life is filled full with whatever it is full of. There is nothing 'mystical' here. I want to talk a little about the way I encounter this myth. My mother died of cancer about four years ago. That dying, was not the struggle for us in the way one would expect. Our struggle was that she could not explain to herself why this was happening to her. She had no way to describe what was taking place in her life. About the last time I visited her, I was struck with just how received is the expenditure of lives of people all over the world who are dying. They may be dying rapidly like she was, or perhaps they are on an eighty year or ninety year timeline. They were all dying, however, without knowing why. I saw they had no way to say what their lives were given for. And I saw in my mother all the paths of people whose lives were given futilely, and the possibility of future generations dying that way. That realization came to me as my responsibility. When you see that kind of weight, that kind of suffering, in the midst of the everyday, it dawns on you sometimes that that burden of life is your burden. It is your burden to pick up and do with what you will. And it is your burden whether you like it or not. It is not that I had any choice about being responsible for creating the story about how it was that my mother died, or how it was that anybody dies; rather, I have the chance to decide about what living is about. That is how those stories get created, through our decision about what living is about.

That means that every one of those decisions is incredibly crucial. The cruciality has an incredible force about it, an incredible weight to it; perhaps not a weight that would paralyze you, but you don't have very long to think about it. No sooner do you face one decision than another is coming -- they just keep coming.

It occurred to me then that my life was full in a way that I had never thought. That my life had weight and necessity about it in a way that I had never dreamed possible, in a way that I had never even hoped that it could be. Maybe then we can talk about happiness. I am absolutely certain that happiness is not the taste of Kent, or something about warm puppy dogs and such. Those are very nice -- I like warm puppy dogs and people holding my hand, but that is not happiness. Happiness has something to do with the way I experience my life when I think about the depth or my participation in life as it is now in the midst of this world. And I guess that is true about all of us.

Maureen Jenkins