The Power of Civil Society: Redefining the Social Experience

How could we possibly measure the cumulative impact that souls like Emerson, Wilson, Kübler-Ross, and others have had on American culture? These three pioneers share more than meets the eye. Each pursued an understanding of the spirit that was unique for his or her time. The elder, Emerson, pursued a path in his thinking; Wilson and Kübler-Ross forged ahead through the experience of their life's missions. Emerson had given up his role of minister, which was too constricting for his cultural vision and ideals. Wilson gained firsthand experience of the spiritual dimension of the human experience, with which he confronted the scourge of alcohol. Kübler-Ross did the same in confronting the inevitability of death. All three fought to find spiritual meaning in a culture that denied it—the culture of scientific materialism. But they did not accept answers from a tradition of religious dogma either. They found hope at the bottom of the abyss. Emerson faced the abyss of meaninglessness in culture. Religion could no longer give him the answers he needed. Bill Wilson faced the way society had turned its back on the spirit, seeking to find its replacement in King Spiritus—alcohol. Kübler-Ross faced the materialistic denial of life beyond death, which she could do only because she gained a firsthand perspective from the other side.

Emerson is no doubt the American philosopher who has most inspired many generations of thinkers and visionaries. His thoughts freed religious, spiritual, and scientific investigations from the shackles of dogma and tradition. He intuited the last frontier that defines the domain of culture: "[the genius] appears as an exponent of vaster mind and will. The opaque self becomes transparent with the light of the First Cause."[24]

The work of Wilson and Kübler-Ross, the other two pioneers who lived nearer to our time, can also be assessed. All we need to do is look around at the social landscape, as it has been affected by the work of hospice and the twelve-step programs. To those who were born in the 1940s or 1950s, it is undeniable that a quiet revolution has occurred in the perception of the matter of dying. We have now moved into an age when the question of death has evolved from a subject that was shunned or completely taboo to a large open horizon for exploration, with innumerable books, workshops, and conferences

available. At least for many, it is clear that death is no longer the final threshold, the end, the period in a sentence. Granted, this new journey is only beginning, but it is one that many now embark upon.

On another front, the work of the twelve-step programs ultimately addresses the question of what it means to be a human being, the question around which all of culture moves. Through the journey that is conveniently divided into twelve steps, the candidate for recovery learns to see himself as the arena of a battle between inner light and darkness; a candidate learns to contemplate herself not only as an all-too-earthly human being but also as a spiritual entity. Wilson himself used to say that our life on earth is a "mere day in a school" and that we are all "pupils in a spiritual kindergarten."[25]

Recovery is possible only when the former addict connects with a higher power that he did not wish or did not know how to consider before. The twelve-step programs show us that we are more than earthly beings; we are individual spiritual essences. It is through reconnection to this truth that we can find a place once more in society. Feeling ourselves to be both earthly and spiritual at the same time causes a tremendous dynamic tension in all of us modern human beings. It is the engine from which culture can derive its impetus. It is not surprising that this dynamic was expressed by both Wilson and Kübler-Ross, from a deep conviction derived from personal experience.

It may be said in passing that nowhere have modern spiritual experiences, such as NDEs, affected as large a number of people as in America. According to the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF), 774 NDEs occur every day in the United States.[26] Part of this can be explained by the increased rate of the experiences at the hand of modern medical resuscitation techniques. The phenomenon of NDE that was experienced by Bill Wilson and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has also been explored by George Ritchie, Dannion Brinkley, Betty Eadie, Rufus Moseley, G. Scott Sparrow, and many others.[27]

The accretion of the work of all of these individuals and the impact their work has had on modern American consciousness are only the beginning of a possible cultural revolution. Only if the disharmony and tension inherent in modern individualism are recognized and embraced can it serve as the stepping-stone for the creation of a new culture. The distance between traditionally held religious values and modern emptiness of soul is the driving engine for a search for meaning. The three cultural heralds we have reviewed

invite us to see the human being as much more than the product of chance, genetics, environment, upbringing, and cultural conditioning. These individuals intuited that all human beings can know inner freedom because they are both earthly and spiritual beings.

The twelve-step programs and hospice are but two of the institutions that contribute to the creation of a new culture. They started as the work of two individuals and their cohorts; at present hospice and twelve-step groups form a network that permeates all of American social reality. When we turn our gaze to the larger social field, we can recognize the larger movement that is at work reshaping our culture—the emerging civil society, the social arena of society that is independent from the private (economic) and the public sectors.

America is standing at a fork in the road, along with much of the rest of humanity. Will we perpetually repeat the past, or will we learn from a future that wants to come into being? It is now undeniable that we have to confront problems of new dimensions with openness of mind and sensitivity of heart. When that confrontation happens fully, new doors open, and the unexpected takes place. One such confrontation did happen; it even ushered in the new millennium.

In the United States the new century was welcomed during the so-called Battle of Seattle in 1999. For the first time in American and global history, the agenda of the world economic elite was brought to a halt. The unexpected outcome expressed the power of an emerging force that had never manifested at a global level before: the power of civil society and its constellation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The American-led push for a global market that disregards culture, labor, and the environment—and in short, everything but the most materialistic human pursuits—received a challenge from the only sector of society that can promote new values: civil society. Before the event at Seattle, only global business and the power of government (and its international extensions in the European Union, NAFTA, CAFTA, WTO, and so forth) had contended for the world stage. In Seattle, fifty thousand demonstrators belonging to a network of national and international NGOs championed ideas of freedom, human rights, respect for the environment, and the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities. This was the first time that NGOs had emerged as a force of their own, rather than delegating their representation to political parties or ideologies.

Civil society organizations are an amorphous conglomerate, often unaware of their own strength, with the potential to promote a third sector that not only stands in contrast with the private (business) and public sectors, but that also can have constructive dialogue with them. Seen at their best, NGOs have the opportunity to fashion a newly independent realm of culture. It is from this sector that the realm of ideas, knowledge, science, arts, and ethics can be defined—not from the economy or from government. It is this arena that sustains human motivation and behavior.

The current dominant economic globalization works from the premise of the primacy of the economy and from the absence of a real culture. It is a universal downward leveler of human values, behavior, and meaning. It is what Benjamin Barber calls a "McWorld," sustained by vague notions of Western tradition but actually defined by absence and vacuum rather than by real presence, substance, and meaning.[28] At the Seattle event, enough people awoke and started to ask what future their society really wanted.

It is through a dialogue that includes government, business, and civil society that we can advance worldwide sustainable development and continue to evolve the cultural/spiritual activism that lay in the visions of Emerson, Wilson, Kübler Ross and others. By allying the strengths of both social movements and consciousness movements, a new culture can propose a paradigm where social change mirrors a deep individual change of consciousness and is sustained from it. Such a change of consciousness is the only thing that can promote a more compassionate future America. Political change alone will not do it.

At present the agenda of elite globalization does much more than map an exploitation of the planet in which all parts fulfill only the role of cogs in a machine. That agenda also determines how financial markets will benefit from unrestricted mobility worldwide, establishes which countries will produce cheap goods for the rest of the world, determines how much labor will cost, and so forth. And these are but surface factors. At a deeper level lies an image of the human being. This brave new world will be populated by human beings deprived of soul and spirit, people who will be able, with indifference, to eat genetically modified or otherwise engineered, synthetic foods; who will repair, enhance, or alter their body functions through nanotechnology; who will extend intellectual and functional capacities through the incorporation of microrobotics and arti-

ficial intelligence; who will live their lives in a virtual bubble; and who, in the midst of looming possible world catastrophe, will continue the uninterrupted march toward a future dominated by coal, oil, or nuclear energy. The mechanized image of humanity is at one end of a continuum; at the other end are the fundamentalisms of various streams, which look only at a personal heaven or nirvana detached from any social dimension and which often project outwardly apocalyptic scenarios that claim to bring the beginning of a new era.

Although we may seek to resist mechanization and reification of the planet, if our culture remains materialistic, it will be condemned to repeat the patterns of the past. In the present materialistic mind-set, the concepts of human rights, respect for the environment, and respect for world cultures are little more than good intentions and empty phrases. All of these values and ideas were traditionally held by religion and must now be renewed from sources of the spirit, in the ways in which hospice, twelve-step programs, and other cultural entities are only beginning to do.

Cultural change renders new things possible because it opens the gates of our imagination and creativity. It is through this potent cultural renewal that we will have an extended, mobile, constantly renewable source of leadership. The inspired leadership that Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated will be found in innumerable individuals with a newly awakened social imagination. The Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street have shown us what strength lies in ordinary individuals doing extraordinary things because they are truly awake to the needs of the time. Cultural renewal will ultimately redefine the elusive yearning for freedom. Where a new project of society is deeply rooted in a fuller image of the human being, the uniqueness of each individual will shine as a matter of fact. Promoting this individuality through a more holistic education, sustaining it, and removing all obstacles to its expression will be the natural desire of a new culture. As the new culture sustains the freedom of the individual, so does the full expression of individuality offer new contributions to society and strengthen its culture in turn, in what could be called a “virtuous cycle.”

It was not economic wealth that made the United States the country of the Declaration of Independence, at a turning point of modern consciousness that was marked by the conquest of the Americas and the development of the scientific outlook. The whole

American continent could have birthed social and cultural renewal. Many South American countries had as much wealth as the United States, or more.

It was not a strong political class or a sudden political revolution that made possible the Declaration of Independence or government for and by the people. Such things have been tried elsewhere and have failed. Rather, what made the US federal government possible was the vast arena of a diverse and manifold cultural ferment. Many civic organizations that blossomed in colonial America played a great part in shaping cultural renewal. One example is the civic initiatives generated in Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia, which gave rise to the Junto, the library, the fire company, and fire insurance.

The life of colonial ideas teemed within a still-vibrant Masonry. No single religion held the nation in its grip. Nor did any particular religion hold a monopoly in any given colony—not Quakerism in Pennsylvania, Catholicism in Maryland, or Congregationalism in New England.

This vibrant exchange of ideas, formation of identity, and forging of meaning was missing in most, if not all, parts of Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina and Chili. Most of these countries have the expanse of territory and the resources that the United States possesses. What they lacked was the cultural aliveness, manifested in cultural pluralism, that offers the basis for societal renewal.[29] It is this cultural renewal that is most urgently needed at present in the United States and worldwide.