

Cultural Erosion

Our lives are surrounded by traditions of every shape and kind. Many of these traditions we have kept for years without knowing why and perhaps others we are just beginning. These traditions we follow whether archaic in nature or profoundly meaningful to us; will shape our lives and mold the culture around us. As culture is influenced by the traditions we keep, our society will change. The effects could be positive or negative, if negative will see erosion of our society and culture.

Why do we need traditions? Traditions form an essential part of our lives for many of the same reasons that civil laws do. If there were no red lights at intersections, we would of course have chaotic streets, and a lot of accidents. If society and culture have no structure the ultimate result will be chaos. Perhaps you can recall going to an annual party, or having a dinner with family every week. While these social gatherings are diverting and enjoyable, do they really have any intrinsic value? Could they be considered a tradition for you? Without putting to fine a point on it, YES! Life and the Universe in general tend to follow entropic laws, which state that all things tend to disorder and chaos. Erosion is common in geology. As deposition of materials builds new mountains, streams and oceans erode away the ones we currently have. Society will follow the same pattern. We will create new traditions, embrace older ones, or simply let them fade away. Our traditions help form a backbone in society and culture by providing, patterns and stability.

If keeping traditions allows for stability it can be presumed that lack of tradition causes a shift in societal practice and perhaps even a breakdown in the cultural environment. It is almost impossible to go a week without hearing someone talk about “the good old days” or hear a relative reminisce fondly about simpler times. Times have changed, that’s all there is to it, but why? The givers of these types of comments are generally older, and grew up under a different set of data based on their own unique enculturation. As time has past slowly by society has eroded away certain norms to create new traditional norms. Their confusion with the present stems from the comparison of their own knowledge with new emergent societal trends.

According to William Haviland “Enculturation is the process by which culture is passed from one generation to the next and through which individuals become members of their society.” If culture is passed from one generation to the next it stands to reason that enculturation begins in the home, specifically from parent to child. Enculturation has culture changed dramatically over the last century. What could be the reason? Do children still have parents? Sadly, in some cases they do not.

The likely change in the enculturation process stems from a breakdown of the nuclear family. The traditional nuclear family consists of a mother, a father, and of course offspring “kids.” While recognizing that there are many variations of the term family and countless variations of family life in society I will refer to the nuclear family as defined above in the traditional sense.

The following statistics are chilling, and disturbing.

- Of 73,001,000 children, only 49,903,000 live with both parents leaving 31.6% of all children in the United States living with just one parent. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.)
- From 1901 to 1970, the divorce rate increased by 700%. In 1900 there were 56,000 divorces in America; in 1992 1.2 million. (Insight 6/17/96, p. 14)
- Within six months of their marriage, 50% of newlyweds begin to doubt the marriage will last, 39% report “big fights” at least once a week and 4% have already separated for at least one night. (Philadelphia Inquirer, 1994)

As shocking as these statistics appear, it really isn't surprising. We have evolved into a disposable society; from the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and right down to the individually wrapped snack cakes we consume. This mindset of everything being replaceable has led to a breakdown in traditional marriage. Sadly the role of marriage has changed in our society and our attitudes about marriage as well.

The problem begins with two unique and different individuals. Both of these individuals come from different walks of life, and most certainly have been exposed to completely different enculturation processes. All individuals enter a marriage with some expectations, needs, wants, and desires. When those expectations come face to face with reality; often there is an initial shock and a period of adaptation. Couples walk into the marriage with a different mindset, or at least we can assume as much from the growing divorce rate; those who can not or will not adapt end up with the dissolution of their marriage. Irreconcilable differences are all that have to be cited today. This is not to say that some marriages should not end. I just question whether or not we as a society have become a little too cavalier about divorce. Serial monogamy is becoming more and more common, according to William Havilland. Serial monogamy is when people marry, divorce and remarry several times.

Breakdown of the nuclear family is accelerating. As the number of divorces increase the number of single parent homes will increase as well. This particular family arrangement is alarming. In the traditional nuclear family there is the best likelihood that one parent will be able to stay at home and raise the kids. This is useful from an anthropological point of view because it provides a stable means for the process of enculturation to take place. There is almost no chance of a parent being able to raise the kids in a single parent home. Someone has to pay the bills, so who raises the kids? Who passes the cultural experience from one generation to the next? The answers to that question are numerous and frightening; Television, music, celebrities, educational institutions, or no one at all. “1.2 million Children per year are born into fatherless homes. America has 1.8 million latchkey kids.” (Seven promises of a promise keeper, p. 118)

Breakdown of traditions will be common in situations like this. There can be little stability for a single parent to teach their children about family traditions, and their value if that parent is always away from the home. Television has become a substitute parent for many children in America. The shows on television have evolved dramatically over the last fifty years. If you want to see the breakdown of acceptable family roles compare the show “Leave it to Beaver” with “The Osbournes.”

As the transmission from one generation to the next erodes away the traditions we are left with lose some of their intrinsic value, and begin to have little meaning in our lives. We must understand the different levels of traditions to understand why

transmission of those traditions from one generation to the next is so critical and difficult. On the far left of the scale we have archaic traditions. These are traditions which we perform without knowing exactly why. Over a space of time the practice has continued, though the exact meaning has perhaps been lost. An excellent example of an archaic tradition is the Act of a man carrying the bride over the threshold of their new home. This tradition is symbolic of Roman soldiers carrying away captive Sabine conquests and carrying away the women by force. In the middle of the scale are traditions that have meaning to us, because we do understand them. On the far right are new traditions that we want to start, for specific reasons. Kwanzaa is an excellent example. It is a new holiday that was created for specific reasons, and to provide cultural enrichment for a specific culture. Of course there are many layers in between each of these but I believe these three are key.

America is becoming more and more isolationist. I don't mean that on a global level, or in a political sense. I mean that the average individual has become more "self centered" or if you prefer "selfish." If newly married couples are saturated with their own wants, needs, and desires, they have a likelihood of ignoring the feelings of their spouse. That selfishness combined with our propensity to "throw out the old and bring in the new" has disastrous consequences especially when children are involved. "63% of youth suicides are single parent children." (CDC, Atlanta, GA)

As a society, we are becoming more voyeuristic. As time has passed, social behavior, which would have been considered unconscionable, lewd, and filthy, have become commonplace acceptable, and the latest fashion.

Pornography and immorality flood the internet like putrid ditches of sleaze and filth. This type of "entertainment" objectifies women as sex objects, with little or no purpose but for male pleasure. Those foolish enough to glorify it as art and fun further erode the traditional value of the feminine in society, and forever damage their ability to form meaningful relationships with those women in society.

Reality TV has flooded the airwaves and as each new season airs its competing program, they become racier; each trying to push the societal limits just a little further to see what they can get away with. Last years super bowl was a prime example of pushing the limit. I personally do not believe Janet's breast exposure was an accident. I suspect that not only was it planned but they believed they would get away with it.

The music produced today is becoming more and more corrosive. Warning labels on some of these albums warn parents that the Lyrics are explicit in nature. Teen idols like Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera parade around practically nude and the children who idolize them will eventually follow suit. Society will continue to change, and likely we will see further decline in acceptable "norms." Traditions are important; the lives we live are more than for our enjoyment. As mentioned above we have a role to play in the enculturation of others. What traditions, values, knowledge, and skills will we pass to the next generation? Change is unavoidable, but not all change has to be degenerative in nature.

If you do not currently have positive family traditions, start some, and make them your own. If archaic traditions have lost their value to society perhaps the time has come to abolish them, and discontinue their practice. Time honored practices should be taught to everyone. Traditions matter, they are part of our continued enculturation, and as such we must have them before we can pass them to someone else.

Sources

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