The Allure of Home

T.S. Weaver investigates ways by which one can employ cultural methods to make the gospel appealing. He concentrates on one piece of culture and expresses a few ideas on how it can be used in the defense of the faith.

Is the pandemic over yet? If we can count the fact that the U.S. has lifted COVID-19 test requirement for international travel as an indicator, I think it's safe to say it is. Regardless, I think we have had enough time to reflect on its impact. The pandemic was an extraordinary blow in 2020. I can remember how it all unfolded like it was yesterday. Everything shut down and my fiancé at the time started working from home (at my apartment mostly because she did not have internet at hers) and I followed suit about a week later, and the infamous toilet paper hoarding began around the nation. Around two years later, the pandemic acts as the backdrop to daily living, and my now-wife is still working from home.

We are rethinking the way we do a lot of things. As one commentator said, "A global health crisis has exposed outdated economic, political and social systems. For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, we have the facility to reimagine our world."{1} While I am not sure what all he means by that, and how much of it is an exaggeration, I can agree the crisis changed things. This same commentator, Kian Bakhtiari, has predicted seven cultural trends "that will shape the next decade."{2} I would call them "cultural texts." According to Kevin Vanhoozer, each cultural text "has meaning to the extent that it communicates something about our values, our concerns, and our self-understanding."{3} Bakhtiari lists his observed cultural texts as:

- a return to traditions
- metaverse jurisdiction
- creator inequality

- divisions in diversity
- ethical investment
- employee activism
- consumerism in crisis

Bakhtiari says,

> Uncertainty has created a strong nostalgia for the good old days and a newfound desire to be rooted in tradition. We, humans, tell ourselves stories to make sense of the world. Stories make us feel like we have control. They allow people to find meaning where there is chaos. In moments of crisis, we often choose to escape the present by seeking refuge in the past.[4]

Has he been reading Joshua Chatraw (author of *Telling a Better Story*) or Paul Gould (author of *Cultural Apologetics*)? Chatraw explains the problem with the current cultural narratives that makes even more sense of Bakhtiari:

> Something's missing. There is a shallowness that gnaws away at the fleeting happiness these narratives offer. The realities of life have a way of applying such pressure at times even the cynic can't help but peer into the secular crevasses beneath his feet. People can't help but feel the existential angst when the script they've assumed begins to break down.[5]

Like Ursula Le Guin says, "There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."[6] Chatraw again says, "Despite the cries of those who claim that we as modern enlightened people should come of age and simply logic-chop our way to truth, story still remains our *lingua franca*."[7]

Bakhtiari takes this story/narrative idea in the direction of connecting with the past via tradition. The first example he gives is something I was completely unaware of and do not understand, but I am not surprised. His example is Gen-Z's

fascination with Y2K fashion, 90s sitcoms and even wired headphones. First, let us all just acknowledge Gen-Zs are weird. During my internship at Probe Ministries, one of the things I learned is that Gen-Zs drive mentors nuts because they are so hard to understand and connect with. Second, I did not even know there was such a thing as Y2K fashion. Strangely, even though I do not understand the appeal with these things other than just they are "old," I have noticed a similar fascination with Mason jars.

All this said, I still do not understand what Bakhtiari means by tradition in this context. He somewhat clarifies by pointing out how globalization attributes to the feeling of losing "local traditions and identity." His proposed solution for global brands is that

> They need to find ways to remain culturally relevant in different markets—with divergent needs and values—while maintaining global consistency. This can only be achieved by working with local markets to produce consumer segments, including different communities and sub-cultures.{8}

Admittedly, I wish he would have gotten more specific, but I often find that when people talk about culture, it is usually in broad strokes and abstract thoughts. I have deciphered what I think he meant by tradition, how it affects culture, and how it is charmed.

Disillusionment

But how did we get to the point that traditions or old stuff have become so attractive to people? For C.S. Lewis there is a "narrative embedded within the deeper structures of the created order, which enables, shapes and moulds the construction and narration of human stories."{9} I believe there is also a narrative embedded within cultural structures. Again, Bakhtiari believes globalization is the problem. So what story is globalization telling us? Bakhtiari thinks the

story goes something like,

> Many countries and communities feel like they have lost their local traditions and identity. The move towards localization is further compounded by nations prioritizing self-reliance. As demonstrated with the rise of populism in advanced economies.{10}

Should we quit telling stories altogether? We are too enlightened for stories, right? As Chatraw says, "Human potentiality is reached not by giving up on stories, which we can't really do, but by embracing the true story of the world—the story that elucidates all other stories."{11} More on that true story later.

Back to globalism and the desire to return to traditions. What is really happening in culture, and what Bakhtiari does not fully grasp, is that we are in a trance from materialism. There is a collective yearning to connect with the transcendent, a reminiscence for an enchanted universe, something past the usual, that will not leave us. This is what the return to tradition is about. Therefore, Gen Zs are fascinated by Y2k fashion and things of the past.

Therefore, there is an obsession with Mason jars. Moderns assert all is matter, while they show a profound desire to relate to something outside the physical earth. The outcome is a silly and eventually inadequate effort to discover meaning, purpose, and identity in dull obsessions.

What this reveals about how our culture thinks is that we are "sensate," as philosopher Paul Gould has articulated.{12} We are obsessed with the material and the physical to the exclusion of the immaterial and spiritual. As C.S Lewis has portrayed, we are concentrating on the "stream of experience."{13} Gould has said, "Our whole education system trains us to fix our minds upon the material world."{14} We turn out to be obsessed with the now, with lack of thinking of

the past (hence the attempted solution to connect with the past via Y2K fashion). The thinking of our culture is superficial and absent of skill to think truly around issues that really matter . . . just look at social media. Most people are driven to a greater extent by emotion and want than by good sense.

It is one thing to think thoughts, but another to live out actions. I just heard on the news the other night an attorney shared her favorite quote that went something like, "It is one thing to think about your values, it is entirely different to live them. That shows what you believe." So how does our culture live? What do people believe? Looking to Gould's analysis again, he argues we are hedonistic.{15} We go from one craving to the next, stuffing ourselves with delights that supply an instant carnal gratification, which turn out either to be a passing flame or new addiction. We have a robust wish to improve fairness, defend the weak and persecuted, and fulfill the wants of all persons. This appeal eventually drops short though, as we hold a disillusioned picture of life and have adopted the parallel principles of greed, decadence, and utilitarianism.

Allure

I hypothesize there is something deeper going on with the desire to return to traditions. The reason Gen Zs and others are becoming obsessed with the past is because it awakens a desire for transcendence. 90s sitcoms take us back and ask us to travel in the direction of the target of our yearning. In the mystical autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recalls three initial events where he roused a yearning for the divine.{16} His earliest event of deep yearning was "the memory of a memory." While he paused near a currant bush on a summer day there unexpectedly began in him "the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House—when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery."{18} Before in his biography,

Lewis had depicted the toy garden as “the first beauty I ever knew.”{19} While Lewis remained gazing away at the scenery, a feeling similar to “enormous bliss” swirled in him.{20} His recollection of that previous recollection stirred inside him a natural yearning for beauty.

Lewis’s next installment of passionate longing happened after he read Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*. While he read the tale, Lewis was unsettled “with what I can only describe as the Idea of Autumn.”{21} Once more, his feelings and his yearnings were taken to something lost from his life. A third peek of inspiration arrived out of poetry. While he casually flipped through Longfellow’s *Saga of King Olaf*, he fell upon this:

> I heard a voice that cried,
> Balder the beautiful
> Is dead, is dead{22}

Lewis writes, “I knew nothing about Balder; but I instantly was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote).”{23} Every one of these events had a little in common: “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy.”{24} Note Lewis’s yearning for the sublime (what he refers to as Joy) was roused out of a recollection of a toy garden, a tale, and a poem.

These are all images of some sort, whether recalled from the past or evoked from reading. James K.A. Smith says, “Our orientation to the world begins from, and lives off of, the fuel of our bodies, including the ‘images’ of the world that are absorbed by our bodies.”{25} Frequently it is the “aesthetic currency of the imagination—story, poetry, music, symbols, and images”{26} that awaken our desire for the transcendent. In a strange way, I think the “return to traditions” examples Bakhtiari uses such as fashion, wired

headphones, and sitcoms represent different memories, symbols, and images that evoke "traditional" feelings for Gen Zs, that are a call to return home—that is the transcendent source.

We Cannot Get Home on Our Own

I think Gen Zs, by returning to traditions, are trying to find their path home by chasing (old) possessions. This method is a stalemate. This self-redemption proposal fails since it does not properly identify the underlying trouble. Our trouble is not a shortage of junk. Our trouble is transgression: humankind is justly guilty to God and merits conviction and accusation. The result of human transgression is death—separation from God. There is no self-redemption, no path home on our own. This is awful news.

Only God, who is wealthy in compassion, has worked out something for man. This is great news: God's answer to mortal disaster—His salvage strategy. This strategy climaxed in the coming of Jesus, His death on the cross that paid the price of transgression for man, and His resurrection proving He is God. Jesus offers us a path home. Jesus declares, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."{27} C.S. Lewis says, "The thing you long for summons you away from self. . . . Out of our selves, into Christ, we must go."{28}Gould said, "Paradoxically, if we aim for home and happiness, we won't find it. We must instead aim at something else—or better, *someone* else—and along the way, we will find shalom."{29} As Jesus spoke,

> If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?{30}

You will either receive the joy and home God gives, or

perpetually go hungry. The choice is yours.

Notes

1. www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f

2. www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f

3. Kevin Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007), 26.

<4. www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f

5. Joshua D. Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 7.

6. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1989), 25.

7. Chatraw, 17.

8. www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f

9. Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 65.

10. www.forbes.com/sites/kianbakhtiari/2022/02/20/7-cultural-trends-that-will-shape-2022-and-beyond/?sh=52aeb883768f

11. Chatraw, 18.

12. Paul Gould, *Cultural Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 28.

13. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour, 1990), 11.

14. Paul Gould, *Cultural Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 28.

15. Ibid.

16. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955).

17. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16.

18. Ibid.

19. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 7.

20. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16.

21. Ibid.

22. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 17.

23. Ibid.

24. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 17-18.

25. James K.A. Smith, *Imaging the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 17.

26. James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 129.

27. *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), John 14:6.

28. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins,

2001), 154.

29. Paul Gould, *Cultural Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 205.

30. *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Matthew 16:24-26.

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