

Wandering Pilgrims or Lost Souls?”

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As short interactive reflection on how
America's love affair with mobility has reshaped its culture.

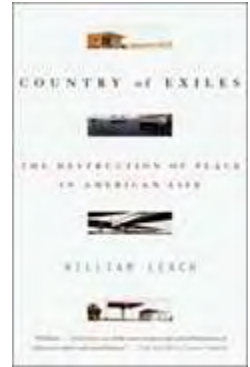
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Loosely based on the book:
“Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life”
by William R. Leach,

America's Love Affair with Mobility...

Globalization, transnational corporations and commercialism have spawned an **endless movement of American workers and “happiness-seekers”** across borders and boundaries, severing ties with their pasts and homogenizing a once varied and majestic landscape into a featureless replication of strip malls and theme parks.

“Wandering Pilgrims or Lost Souls?” is a short interactive reflection on how America's love affair with mobility has reshaped its culture. Based on the book *“Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life”* by William R. Leach, it explores the:

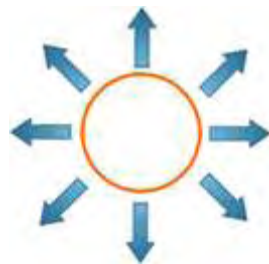


- troubling effects of this “rootlessness” on our communities; and
- the loss of our spiritual connection to the land on which we live.

Has America's relentless pioneering spirit to pull up stakes and find a new frontier created a more vibrant and flexible society or instead, has our endless pursuit of wealth and instant gratification destroyed our sense of community and neighborly respect, seeding greater lawlessness and apathy from coast to coast?

The Push and Pull of Social Patterns

From the late colonial period on, Americans have been advocates and captives of the need to move, get out of town, to end up far from the spot where they began. At the same time, a reverse pattern was taking shape, one that encouraged Americans to settle down, domesticate themselves and forge a cohesive identity.



Centrifugal Force



Centripetal Force

The first pattern we could call centrifugal because it thrusts outward and cared little for boundaries and centers. The second pattern we could call centripetal because it favored instead boundaries and centers and cultivated a sense of place.

Until the 70s, these two opposing patterns have worked together; pushing and pulling yet creating a kind of equilibrium or tension that created a dynamic and vital America. But the balancing act

changed as the ease of mobility and the rapid-fire speed of modern communication favored the centrifugal forces of motion over the gravitational patterns of settled communities.

As an increasingly rootless society always on the move, we live longer, earn more money and in some sense, have broadened our cultural perspective embracing new cultures across the globe in shared economic pursuits.

But torn from the nurturing habits of community, we often lead emptier lives. All too often, the “**business**” of America has kept Americans absent from their children's lives, absent from their communities and country, and willing, more than ever, to delegate to others—by choice or necessity—those responsibilities they once carried out themselves.

A Nation of Change...

In America during the past 50 years:

- A system of transportation has been created, featuring a dizzying profusion of highways, gateways and vehicles—all helping to perpetuate a worldwide economic interdependence while challenging the integrity of local communities.
- **A vast landscape of “temporary” has arisen, peopled with thousands** of floating executives and countless numbers of part-time and temporary workers, all unable or unwilling to make long-term connections to their neighborhoods.
- Even our great universities, for so long the backbone of American homespun intellect and ingenuity, have bartered away independent scientific research and prestigious teaching positions to the highest corporate bidder.



Recently a backlash has begun as Americans are starting to feel betrayed, overwhelmed by forces and institutions seemingly indifferent to their welfare, relentlessly hammering stability into instability, the fixed into the flexible, and the rooted into the rootless.

Property Profits

Many Americans now view their properties only in money terms. **Dwellings and land holdings are no longer “homes” but** transformed into sellable commodities measurable by their market value. An ever-increasing percentage of our society has turned to investing in a shadow world that beckons a promise of quick profit and wealth: the stock market and real estate transactions. As a result, indifferent bankers and real estate brokers have asserted themselves on a global canvas, growing more powerful and less accountable with every passing day.



A Pilgrim's Quest?

Innate in the American psyche is the pioneering spirit to pull up stakes and find a new frontier. As Lewis Lapham eloquently described in his 1992 *Harper's* magazine article **“Who and What is an American?”**

“[The American psyche] is about the invention of self. Because we have little use for history, and because we refuse the comforts of a society established on the blueprint of class privilege, we find ourselves set adrift at birth in an existential void, inheriting nothing except a plausible self. Who else is the American hero if not a wandering pilgrim who goes forth on a perpetual quest?”



By the late nineties, the constant drumbeat for flexibility and self-invention had gone too far, not only because it blotted out the merits of place, but because it failed to address how few Americans could really invent themselves and to what degree their mobility and flexibility had nothing to do with their own free will but had been imposed on them by others.

This centrifugal force of “finding a new frontier” has, in many ways, permeated the business mindset, churning out an endless supply of executives and aspiring corporate climbers who are ready to jump at a moment’s notice and relocate to wherever their company decides. As a result, this undermines a sense of obligation to one’s neighborhood and any affinity to a “place” to call home has been considered antithetical to success.

Stewards of "Place"

Boundary and space, place and freedom—these things do not contradict each other but go hand in hand. People need to feel a bond to a concrete reality larger than self, a reality that gives meaning to their existence. They need to be stewards of concrete places in which they live because to lose that stewardship is to lose faith in oneself and society.



Historically this concrete reality has taken the form of a hometown or region because these have carried strong meaning and association (such as a memory of Main Street or a shady maple they cherished as a family) enriching the lives of most ordinary people and helping them reach beyond themselves.

A strong sense of “place” along with the boundaries that shape it and give it meaning also helps provide people—especially children—with an assurance that they will be protected and not abandoned. A society bent on exalting a borderless mentality that champions relentless movement and pioneering an ever-changing new frontier, faces the real dangers of spinning out of control.

The sense of “place”—a safe haven so to speak—should ideally be created by parents who care and love their children. It is indisputable that children need a sense of place, a clearly defined personal haven of safety in order to grow and become more self-reliant. “Place” should be nurtured—not by jack-booted police enforcing stringent state laws—but by concerned parents who give their homes and their neighborhoods a feeling of permanence and indestructibility which every child (and inner child in each one of us!) needs.

Without a well-defined sense of “place”, there can be no citizenship, no basis for common bonds to others, no willingness to give back to the public realm or be taxed, even lightly, for the welfare of others.

Tourism Trivializes...

Years ago, historian Daniel Boorstin, in his book *The Image*, discussed the difference between travel and tourism. Travel he stated was an activity that compelled people to truly interact with the places they visited. People traveled on their own terms, following their own passions and accepted whatever distress that came their way as the price paid for the pleasure granted.



Modern tourism, on the other hand, insulates people from experiencing and knowing the world through an elaborate set of protections (such chain motels and fast food restaurants of unrelieved sameness, pre-arranged tours, etc.). It transformed travelers into passive consumers of painless adventure.

Worst of all, the selling of “brand U.S.A.” by the

- re-creation of historic cities; and
- re-packaging our history and culture in banal theme parks,

...blatantly trivializes the uniqueness of regions, events and places.

Crossing Boundaries

In stark contrast to the typically safe and passive mainstream tourism of today, truly moving across boundaries to experience the unfamiliar and the new (when harmonized with the traditions of place) can only enrich the character of the whole culture. Wisdom begins when people risk reaching across borders in the “act of becoming.” By “crossing a boundary” people see others as if for the first time.



Away from the stable cores of societies—at the permeable perimeters such as the unstable border towns or the transition zones of a city’s ethnic enclaves—creative life happens. Here is where understanding and empathy is a basic component of survival. Here is where narrow-minded perspectives and distrust of “the other side” are constantly under fire and renegotiated daily.

“Disneyworld tourists” more often than not return home without gaining a realistic experience of the harshness or awkward unfamiliarity of “walking the streets” of a foreign culture. Escalating conflicts broadcast on the evening news or the sudden appearance of a “foreigner” moving in down the street are still vague abstractions, not easily processed in the comfort zone of familiar day-to-day activities.

Patriotism

Nationalism, without a doubt, has menaced the world, especially in the hands of centralizing elites manipulating the inherent tribal bonds of its people. But the love of country or patriotism “rooted in a particular place (rather than in any race or ethnic affinity) is quite another matter—it is essential for a healthy social fabric—weaving an intertwining thread that keeps self-centered extremism at bay.

Patriotism at its best, inspired by history or a shared sacrifice in a shared country, is not racist or exclusionary; it is civic-minded and inclusive, devoid of the hatred that so often arises out of communities separated by class, race or ethnicity.

Many Americans on the move, it could be argued, want or need some kind of bond to their country (or region) they know and have grown up in. They inwardly pine for a larger sense of place, an abstraction to admire love and defend.



Conclusion

Our mobile suburban environment has made Americans increasingly concerned with time and movement rather than place and permanence. Multinational corporations and commercialism have spawned an endless movement of workers and their families across borders and boundaries. We no longer gain a feeling of community from where we live or where we assemble but from common work hours, habits, and customs.



“Freedom of choice” has become an ironic mantra since, in reality, most Americans have little control over the larger arena in which they choose their goods and services. Those with the capital and the marketing agenda create the context, the boundaries, and the entire

culture in which ordinary folk make their choices. Ironically we are becoming more and more alike as consumer culture and the market forces exert a homogenous uniformity further and further across the land.

At the dawn of the present century, the rising mass-market economy served to divorce Americans further from shared communities. American business did more than strive to inspire a desire for goods and to create a new institutional landscape to sustain it; it also changed the way Americans looked at and understood place.

In the interest of getting the 'new and improved', the American mindset was conditioned to overturn the past and begin again: to disregard all kinds of attachments. The result is a continued splintering of American society into a nation of self-interested individuals perfectly served by a global capitalism that looks pretty much the same all over the world.

Questions

Has the pace of modern life and the freedom of mobility kept us absent from our children's lives, and absent from our communities and country? Has our collective failure to protect and honor the past mislead us into forgetting our spiritual connection to the land on which we live? The mind-numbingly sameness of suburban sprawl across America and ever-increasing ranks disconnected and disillusioned around us sadly seems to indicate yes.



Although we can't turn back to clock, turning inward once again to our communities, neighbors, and gardens would be a sensible place to start.

-END-

--Rich Coffey Oct 2009--

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