

Cyberspace is the new Heaven

By Steve Welzer

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Greens often advocate decentralism and bioregionalism owing to a conviction that identification with a particular place on earth (a territory or a parcel of land) fosters ecological consciousness and good stewardship praxis.

Identification with a particular place was a fundamental aspect of tribal existence. For example, Lenape identity encompassed a distinct group of people speaking dialects of the Munsee language, practicing characteristic Algonquian cultural lifeways within a territory they called Lenapehoking (around and between the Delaware and lower Hudson rivers). All of these elements were integral, and "who I am" was inseparable from "the land I call Home."

The intimate aboriginal relationship with a territory involved a deep familiarity with the flora and fauna of that place. The idea of "community" extended to animal and plant "relatives" ("all my relations"). The land and its creatures were felt to be enspirited. Most tribal peoples were animists, having an earth-based sensibility of sacredness. The trend toward monotheism following the "ascent into civilization" involved a radical transition during which earth-centered spirituality was displaced by the modern sky-god religions. People's attention and concern shifted as the locus of sacredness was "elevated" to the heavens. The relationship with the land and the local was fundamentally altered.

Attention has shifted outward and upward

These trends have been viewed by Western civilization as part of the process of progressive development. The ideology of progress holds that "backward rural peoples" suffer from illiteracy, provincialism, and parochial-mindedness. Their "horizons are limited." On the other hand, the domain of experience and attention of urban cosmopolitans is expansive. In the modern era the latter has, in fact, become global, enabled by expanding channels of transportation and communication.

Since its inception, civilized life has encroached upon and crowded out tribal life. Resources have been drawn away from villages toward the metropolis. Centralized states have fostered technological progress, recognizing it as an instrumental phenomenon in the service of power elites.

The building of roads opened up new areas for exploitation. The expansion of commerce yielded greater profits. But the increasingly sophisticated and powerful technologies of mobility and communication -- while promoted by the commercial, statist and military elites in their own interest (the internet was birthed at the U.S. Department of Defense) -- have served to take all of us "outward and upward."

Less and less connection to place

The unfolding of this process throughout history has been accompanied by occasional expressions of skepticism and regard for consequences. In his essay "Life Without Principle" (1863) Thoreau writes: "In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while."

Clearly the trend has accelerated over time. Where Thoreau's poor fellow might have received ten letters a day, the poor folks of our modern cyber-reality are overwhelmed by ten emails or text messages per hour. The busy-busy business executive (and the homework-avoiding high-schooler!) might be getting a hundred electronic messages in a day.

Our domain of experience is fast becoming "elevated" into the World Wide Web. Interestingly, cyberspace is now being referred to as "the cloud," apropos of the fact that our attention and concern is orienting more and more toward this new Heaven. A visitor from another planet might infer that our ubiquitous screens are our Portals to the Sacred, but in truth they are our most-modern source of distraction.

We've gone too far

There is a mystique about it all that is not likely to endure. We have access to boundless magnitudes of facts and information, while few of us are knowledgeable about where our water comes from when we turn on the faucet. We follow news from around the world, but most of our neighbors are unfamiliar to us. We have hundreds or thousands of cyber-friends, but few of them live close enough to spend face-to-face time with on a regular basis.

With so little connection to place and such facile ability to communicate at a distance, hypermobility has become the norm. Sustained daily-intimate relationships have become a rarity. Families "keep in touch" while widely scattered, but there is little real touch and no particular place is felt to be the stable and beloved familial home.

A case can be made that "progress" has taken us too far from our original localist community-and-place-based life orientation. We now live everywhere and nowhere. What cyberspace and the internet represent are just the latest next-step in the problematic process of losing our grounding. It follows that what we need is to bring our attention "back down" . . . away from heaven-sacredness, away from the global marketplace, away from the industrial mega-state, away from the cyberspace "cloud" . . . and back toward a particular place-on-earth where we can renew real community and recreate Home.

A Daoist parable gives a sense of the other end of the spectrum from where we find ourselves now:

A Small Country of Few People

People do not travel far. They have boats and carriages but little use for them.

They have armor and weapons but do not display them. Their food is plain but good. Their clothes are simple but fit well. Their homes are secure.

Villagers in this country often live within earshot of a neighboring village, so close that they can hear each others' roosters crowing in the morning and dogs barking in the afternoon. Yet they rarely feel the need to visit; they are content where they are, satisfied in place.

By contrast, we are restless, bored and unsatisfied. We try to solve our problems of attention deficit disorder and hyper-stimulation by adding on more stimulation (or taking pills). We are losing appreciation for simple equilibrium, peace and quiet, limits and balances.

Erich Fromm said that societies-as-a-whole can exhibit characteristics of insanity. If we don't get back to lifeways centered around the basics of land, soma, and community, we will be in danger of losing even more -- ecological consciousness and personal health, as well as social sanity.

It's time to shatter the mystique of the cybernetic dystopia that is threatening to envelop us in an electronic daze. It's time to recognize that, rather than the "next higher stage" of technological development, it constitutes the next misguided milepost on the road to a pathological future.

Lewis Mumford, in his *Myth of the Machine* (1970), writes: "On the terms imposed by technocratic society, there is no hope ... except by 'going with' its plans for accelerated 'progress.' But for those of us who have thrown off the myth of the machine, the next move is ours: for the gates of the technocratic prison will open automatically ... as soon as we choose to walk out."