

The Price of Civility February 2014

A couple months ago, I had the good fortune of making a trip to South Africa and Botswana. It was another check off the old bucket list, worth every penny and every moment. There is great value in going places we haven't been before. The immersion into a totally new place takes the mind back to a child-like state, with every sense experiencing something new. It's a smorgasbord of continuous fresh inputs, a rejuvenating exercise for the mind's synapses.

One of the more memorable experiences on this trip occurred when our crew ascended Cape Town's Tabletop Mountain via cable car. Each cable car, about 15 x 15, fits sixty or so people. Ours was crowded, but not sardine-packed, so it was a reasonably comfortable ride up the almost mile high ascent from ocean to summit.

While looking around and listening to the crowd, I was struck by its ethnic diversity. In our car of sixty or so people, there could have been fifteen different languages being spoken, including English, Spanish, various European, Asian, Middle Eastern and African dialects, Russian, Japanese and even Chinese. There we were, a smattering of nations, sharing something together, in a country that was, for most of us, very far from home.

This is a brand new experience for humanity. For the first time in human history, huge numbers of people are getting the chance to interact with others from enormously different cultures. Why is this so?

Today we live in an extremely interconnected world. Without the effort of many different cultures working together we would not have the plethora of consumption choices that enrich our modern lives. Production and consumption are now a global affair.

That smart phone in your pocket or purse is the result of effort from people in as many as twenty different countries. A similar story exists for the parts that make up your automobile, the appliances in your kitchen, and electronics in your media room and office. It takes an enormous amount of interaction to coordinate all this global production, logistics and consumption.

Our clothing is made in Third World countries where impoverished workers connect to modern societies through the styles, colors, patterns and images they work with. Bangladeshi seamstresses know what you are wearing. By making our clothing, they touch the advanced world, learning something about us, possibly providing them an image of what they want out of their world one day.

Food is cross-pollinating globally, as people gain greater and greater access to cuisine from other nations. In the remote desert of central Botswana, our native African cook served us homemade lasagna, fish and chips and Weinerschnitzel. Today's food renaissance is exploding choices and expanding taste buds all over the world. It may not be long before TexMex follows hamburgers, pizza and fried chicken across the globe.

It almost goes without saying that media has gone global. Hollywood movies are released internationally, while television signals are transmitted around the world via satellite. In the remote region of Botswana we visited, maybe a thousand miles from "civilization," the native African workers at our very modest accommodations were watching American television in English and listening to classic rock music.

And what can most anyone in the world see, read or watch with an Internet connection? Literally anything and everything they want. Attempts to keep societies shut off from any and all information are likely pointless. Natural human curiosity and ingenuity will prevail.

Never have so many people from so many different countries been engaged in commerce, communication and physical interaction on such a scale.

It is certainly worthwhile to recognize the impact globalization has on our every day life, but perhaps more important is understanding the value this cultural interaction brings to civilization as a whole. We might even be able to suggest that today's interconnected global economy has ushered in a new more civilized era. With it has come a much more peaceful world.

Contrary to the messages we see from our sensationalist media, today is the most peaceful time in modern history. Harvard professor Steven Pinker's book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, lists several reasons for this fall in physical conflict, but the one that really caught my attention was the "expanding circle of empathy." The more we are exposed to different cultures, the more we understand each other, the less we fear each other.

For thousands of years, we have feared different cultures. Why? Mostly, because they were unknown, because we knew little to nothing about them, nor they about us. That which we don't know or understand we tend to fear. "I'm not going to let those Chinese eat our dog," suggested my Hong Kong tour guide in 1997, just a few months before England relinquished control. Do you think that fellow feels the same way today?

The more familiar we become with different, the easier it is for us to accept different, until one day, different really isn't different anymore. So it would seem the more we learn about each other's culture, the more we interact eyeball to eyeball, the more different becomes familiar.

Economy is what binds us all. It gives us the chance to interact. It requires us to do so for commerce and allows us to do so for leisure. Should our global economy stumble severely, we risk falling back into the world of the unknown where fear, prejudice and extreme self-interest dominate. At this stage the peace dividend provided by our current global ecosystem is by no means permanently sustainable. Stress points certainly exist.

This presents us with an enormous conundrum. We have economies all over the world being manipulated by governments rather than left to evolve more organically, whatever that may be. The emerging economies are naturally focused on continuing the growth of their own prosperity,

while the advanced economies seem bent on supporting decaying institutions in order to maintain order. Empowerment fuels the emerging while entitlement burdens the advanced.

Behind both the empowered emerging markets and burdened advanced economies stands the force of modern technologies. If not for our modern technologies, we would not have this ever-growing global economy, the force bringing us closer and closer together. But technology-driven globalization comes with its own set of consequences.

The opening of global markets to all willing and capable producers benefits the emerging economies because of their cheaper labor pool and lower infrastructure fixed costs. Simultaneously, advanced economies are threatened by the new, more cost competitive producers, significantly higher infrastructure fixed costs and technology's rapid replacement of their more costly labor pool.

Technology has provided a grand opportunity to build civility while possibly serving as a threat to the advanced world's economic stability. But since we are all now so interconnected, if the advanced economies catch a cold the emerging markets may end up in the emergency room.

So when the Armchair or others moan about the numerous seemingly irrational actions of governments around the world—efforts to avoid economic pain at all costs—we probably should consider the sociological implications of letting economy stumble measurably, much less fail. The more and more interconnected we become, the more and more interdependent we become as well. Failure anywhere could trigger a global calamity, risking a return to the darker ages of isolation and fear that naturally leads to more violence.

As with any change, there are always consequences. Transitioning from a world of strangers to a world of growing civility may require us to sacrifice something for the time being. Today that sacrifice may be tolerating what many consider the dysfunctional management of economy. But down the road, as more dramatic challenges do appear, the fostering of ever-stronger global empathy may prove to serve us all well.