

Homo Colens

I would like to see fewer biographies of great individuals and more biographies of great families or villages. We tend to overrate the singular man of original genius, while ignoring the slow accumulation of culture built up layer upon layer, century upon century, that makes the individual man of genius possible in the first place. Only so much culture can be gained in a single generation. If I may steal a metaphor from Joseph Epstein's essay, "The Ideal of Culture," who steals in turn from Willa Cather's novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, culture is like the onion and crouton soup served to Bishop Latour by his friend, Father Vaillant. Only a Frenchman could make such a soup, which leads Latour to say,

I am not deprecating your talent, Joseph, but, when one thinks of it, a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup.

A constantly refined tradition—some provincial subject of Rome learned from her mother a way of making a certain kind of bread. Perhaps she found a way to make it just a little better by changing the kneading process slightly. Twelve generations later, a baker from the next village finds that the dried-out leftovers from this type of bread make nice croutons. Someone else in the north of France, during the reign of Philip IV, seasons such croutons from a stock pot left simmering with marrow-rich bones. And on and on, just to get the crouton piece of the onion and crouton soup.

How many little things do we encounter every day—things that add so much loveliness and dignity to our lives—that could not possibly have been invented all at once in a single generation? Even the off-gridders and paleodieticians rely on countless resources, often

in the form of known-how, that only come to them after thousands of years of painstaking cultivation away from bare survival in the woods. It is easy to think that this incremental move away from bare survival in the woods is a move away from nature. But culture is natural to man because human nature *is to cultivate*, in all the senses of that word's root, the Latin word *colo*: to till the soil, to reap the fruits, to inhabit the same estate generation after generation, to devote oneself to the perfecting of something beautiful, to worship. Man is the cultural animal. We are *Homo Colens*.

All the other attributes of man that have been suggested as our distinguishing feature are cultural. Language separates us from the lower beasts, but language itself is something cultivated and passed on from mother to daughter. Language is not static, but rather grows organically in delightfully variegated ways over generations. Henri Bergson and Hannah Arendt suggest that we are *homo faber*, the tool-making and crafting animal. All our artisanship, however, is a form of *cultus* because each technique is learned primarily by imitation of our forebears and only secondarily supplemented by individual creativity and invention. Sometimes this is contrasted with Johan Huizinga's *homo ludens*, the playing and consciously delighting animal. Our playful arts, however, also are what they are only through continual refinement. How much distance had to be covered before something closer to Ring-around-the-Rosie in the dim mists of the preliterate bronze age turned into a play of Aeschylus?

More fundamentally, we have been called both *homo religiosus* and *homo sapiens*, man as the religious animal and man as the rational animal. Both our spiritual and our rational dimensions, however, are more rooted in the community of generations than Enlightenment thinkers tend to suppose. From conception, a human being is a spiritual, rational person, but this hidden interiority only comes into developed embodied fullness as we learn the practices of worship and dialectic in a community of other spiritual persons who themselves only learned from others. The highest meaning of *cultus* transcends the plowing of fields or the cultivation of even our loveliest arts. At its summit, human *cultus* is the sacramental life of the Church, and we are most human when we fully immerse ourselves in this life.

I

I heard a story from a friend who visited a winery in Croatia. It was small and family owned. Nobody knew how long a vineyard had occupied this patch of land ideally sloping down to the Adriatic, but one suspects that grapes have grown there in one way or another since before the Romans came. Nobody knew, likewise, how long the vineyard had been in the family since the genealogy has grown so long that the whole story can no longer be told. Such a family always has little projects going on to improve what they love. “Grandfather built that wall over there and now we are extending it to surround the new storage building.” Such family wealth is not the wealth of coins but the substantial wealth that allows a father to pass on a whole way of life. Not every generation, however, gains ground. My friend told me that the family brought out a bottle for her to try. They could not sell it, they said, because it was ruined. Its flavor was all ashes and smoke. Years ago, the whole region had been devastated by wildfires, and an entire year’s harvest had turned bitter along with the loss of buildings and equipment. “We keep it,” they said, “To remember what we have been through.”

Another fire heavily damaged the cathedral in Chartres France on 7 September 1020 causing the bishop Fulbert to begin construction on what would become one of the finest things human beings have ever done. The earlier building damaged in that fire was not itself the first church to stand on that spot. The first was built some time prior to the fifth century, but this church was burned down by the Duke of Aquitaine in 743. The second church was burned down by Danish pirates in 858, parts of which remain in the present Saint Lubin Chapel. They broke ground on the final church in 1126, faced setbacks from more fires, began again in 1194, completed the building in 1252, and finally reconsecrated it under St. Louis IX, King of France, in October of 1260. Stone upon stone, church upon church, generations of masons labored, whose names we cannot now discover. Imagine being one of those tradesmen to begin the work in 1126 at, say, the age of 37. Imagine dying at 63 in 1152 with the

completion of the work another 100 years off, not knowing what further layers of work would be completed by your sons and your sons' sons.

That ending may sound depressing to some, but such a life and death is one of the noblest I can think of. Would it really be more desirable to finish your own career, retire to a few rounds of golf so that you can bequeath to your children nothing more than a moderately swollen account and some closets to go through?

Not all of us who are sympathetic to this line of thinking can inherit a vineyard in Croatia. We are born into a particular time and place and many of our parents bought into the post-war American culture of the 60s and 70s—some more than others. Many of us did not grow up learning to read Latin or play Bach because we went through childhood as the unwitting subjects of a school system more concerned with denigrating and supplanting a tradition than passing one on. This means that we must be modest in what we can hope to cultivate and leave to our own children.

Right now, classical schools are springing up all over the country, but few of these schools can be wholly true to their own classical ideals for the simple reason that none of their faculty or even their principals have themselves received a classical education. We are all making up for lost time. Suppose that all these schools accomplish, however, is just a little progress: the education of our children in such a way that some of them can go on to teach our grandchildren in a more truly cultured manner. Learning Latin as an adult, I teach my son in a rather clumsy way so that he can teach his son in a better way. The same principle applies to Shakespeare, to classical philosophy and theology, to music and art, and to all the other things that we have lost (or that we actively despised and destroyed). I have every reason to think that we can, in fact, accomplish more than this even in the present generation, but just suppose that this is all we can manage. Would that not be a worthy enough bequest to our sons and daughters?

II

The process of layered culture is not limited to the high culture of Latin and Shakespeare. As human beings, we rely on this constant refinement of a tradition in every area of life from things that are small and ordinary, such as learning the best way to shave, to things that are foundational to the whole shape of the life that we will lead, such as learning how best to carry out a romance. We can easily miss how difficult it is to figure out the small and ordinary in the absence of a cultural model to imitate. How often does one shave? What kinds of blades are best? How does one avoid cutting oneself? What does one do when one does cut oneself and must put on a dress shirt for work? Ideally, a boy learns all these things from his father, or uncle, or some other man whom he admires. These days, such questions can readily be answered with a little research, but the difficulty of the young man's predicament lies in the thousands of such questions that must be answered and the impossibility of even knowing where to start or that there are so many questions to be answered in the first place. How does one dress for work any way? How does one talk to coworkers appropriately? How does one open a conversation? Culture works by looking to models that we admire and answering such questions by imitation with little improvements of our own along the way.

Conservatives tend to focus on absolute universal moral standards: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. When faced with the question of how best to shave, they usually write such questions off as "matters of individual prudence," rightly recognizing that a single answer cannot be given absolutely for all young men in all circumstances at all times. But such an answer hardly gives the young man any real guidance, and the solution to his troubles cannot be readily gleaned by studying the Bible. Liberals tend to focus on the cultural contingency of such things and wrongly infer that culturally contingent things are, at best, simply arbitrary—and at worst, a threat to individual freedom and self-expression. What the young man needs, however, is an uncle to come along and show him how to mix his soap, where to buy proper blades, and how to hold his razor

so that he does not cut himself. Is this a law of absolutely inviolable morality? Of course not—but neither is it arbitrary. It is a matter of culture, and a cultured person is someone who has internalized many such things and integrated them into a harmonious, flourishing way of carrying oneself through life.

Such ordinary matters are trivial in isolation, but we should not despise them on that account, for thousands of trivial things pile up to form the vast majority of our daily lived experience. With a continuously refined tradition at our backs, we stand a good chance of carrying out this day-to-day existence rather well. Without such a basis to begin from, however, we are forced to muddle through on our own best guess. Sometimes we divine a pretty good way to operate, but mostly we just make a mess.

If such logic stands for the trivial, it must stand all the more for those affairs that, while not belonging to the realm of moral absolutes, are nevertheless weighty and require much wisdom. How does one choose whom to court? What might be said on a third date to win her heart? When does one make a proposal and how? What kinds of intimacy are appropriate before and after a proposal? And those questions only cover the period before marriage.

Knowing the refined habits and graces of daily married life is a form of practical wisdom, and while possessing its secret may not make a person completely invulnerable to life's tragedies, it certainly does mitigate many of the worst. Those most successful in this sphere usually have at least one model couple to look up to, although it is better to have several. The model couple will never exactly match one's own situation and they will never be perfect. But such is all culture. We start with what we admire, learn what we can, apply to our own circumstances, and make adjustments. With all of our own faults, we hope to be in turn a model for our own children and other younger couples of our acquaintance. It turns out much better than just guessing at what to do or following the immediate impulses of our most reptilian psychology.

III

I suspect there are two main reasons why many today do not aspire to the life of long culture. First, we have come to worship the ideal of authenticity, which means doing one's own thing. One must move to New York City and start from scratch. One must find oneself. One must be original—just like everyone else. A certain amount of independence and self-knowledge is, of course, a requisite part of a complete human life. But I begin to worry when I see friends feel the need to move and start from scratch every five years. If we have not already found it, we will never discover our real self—unconstrained by parents, hometown, responsibilities—or spouse after the third career or the second divorce. Mostly, that dream of the real self is just the product of marketing.

The second reason is deeper and has more moral force. We are increasingly aware today of the many sins of our forefathers. How many of all those innumerable prior soups before I make this onion and crouton soup were made by oppressed peasants for their haughty overlords? Might this not dirty my hands? More directly, we worry that our whole inheritance, both intellectual and material, was only gained through systems of injustice. Might it not be better to burn the whole house down in hopes of beginning again with a clean conscience? Our very sensitivity to such moral qualms, however, is part of the inheritance laboriously gained through centuries of moral reflection. The Assyrians were not so nice. Burning the house down might offer a momentary sense of catharsis, but it might also bring us right back to the level of the Assyrians. What is more, keeping our hands clean from anything tainted by a past of injustice might make us feel pious, but it really does nothing to help anyone in the present still suffering from injustice.

We may be tempted to feel a kind of survivor's guilt when we have the good fortune to experience the happiness of long cultural capital while so many live in the bleakness and misery of anti-culture. The solution to this, however, is not to join them in bleakness and misery until we contrive some utopian scheme for getting everyone out at once. This would

only serve to increase the domain of anti-culture and add to the already too great mass of human suffering. The best way to help those left out in the cold when we are enjoying a family dinner is not to cancel the dinner, but to invite them in.

As Anthony Esolen so beautifully describes in his book, *Out of the Ashes*, we have so many unused rooms in our inherited manor house that we could easily accommodate more guests if we would uncover the furniture and dust a little. Never has it been easier to read the great texts of the canon completely for free. The whole treasury of classical music is there to be taken up and played. Instead of scrolling through Twitter, one might just as easily scroll through the freely available collections of the Freer, the Frick, the Met, the National Gallery, or the Louvre. So much of the best that has been thought and said and sung and sculpted is right there just waiting for those in this generation who are willing to take up the work of long culture and pass it on to those who will be immeasurably ennobled and humanized by it. It has not all been burned down by the Duke of Aquitaine or Danish pirates, but it might, if we fail, be simply forgotten.

In the end, the hope of keeping our hands clean by keeping away from the sins of our fathers is a fool's hope anyway. We have much too many sins of our own to be so fastidious. There is nothing we can burn down that will serve as an adequate atoning sacrifice. We can only look to the end and source of all true culture, the center around which all those churches of Chartres revolved and still revolve, the highest possible aspiration of all our human making of bread and wine. We can only look to that sacrifice lifted up with the declaration:

ECCE AGNUS DEI, ECCE QUI TOLLIT PECCATA MUNDI.

—D.T. Sheffler