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THE COMMON GOOD IS THE NEW FRONTIER

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

—Is. 56:7

As part of enclosure, the Scots were driven off the land and replaced with sheep. The peasant farmers weren't producing enough income, and you could make more money raising sheep. Most of the Scots who emigrated left because they were forced off their land. By forcing people off the land, the private landowners created a desert and called it freedom. And that was the end, in essence, of the commons in Scotland.

What was disabled was a set of practices embedded in that culture. Free market ideas replaced the practices that had made up the Scots' culture. To depart the consumer culture, the viewpoint of the commons is a way to create, in our own place, a homeland and to reclaim a culture

that, in fact, was never forgotten. We are looking for the context for a culture of neighborliness. The commons is what some would call that context—the elements that would allow neighborliness to happen, the nest from which the neighborly culture can grow.

THE NEIGHBORLY COVENANT

Covenant is central to the experience of community and the commons. Covenants are not required in the market world, which places its trust in contracts. Agreements have to be stated, in contracts. A covenant is built on vows in which more is implied than stated. Think again of a wedding vow, in which much is implied and you don't know what form the future is going to take.

Using the language of community and covenant opens up possibilities. For example, covenant language uses vows and neighborly agreements to speak of money and our relationship to it, and to one another. It brings freedom and relatedness into the conversation. It's not bargaining, it's not bartering, and it's not an exchange. It is an invitation to covenantal justice, a call to create a more just or equitable world based on covenant. It's a vow that we take to each other. It's a commitment we make to our neighbors all around us for its own sake.

In many ancient cultures, merchants and traders were financed by people outside the community. It was the unwelcome outsider who made the local economy function. In modern times the outsiders still control the local economy. It is people outside the neighborhood who own the major means of production and consumption. The neighbor's role is to watch the money leave town.

The ancient Jews would from time to time forsake community for market reasons. In a text in Nehemiah the rich Jews are taxing the poor Jews and the poor Jews are having to mortgage their farms in order to pay interest on their debt. What needs to be said about the rich Jews taxing poor Jews is that they were doing that to collect taxes for the Persian Empire; they had signed on for the Empire against their own people. Nehemiah scolds them and forces them to enter into a covenant with one another because they were violating the Torah of doing that against members of the community.

Religion has from the beginning held this as its purpose: to find the “way” away from the “track.” In Judaism Torah is called The Way. In the New Testament, Christians were called “followers of the way” before they were called Christians. The concept of the Tao signifies a way, path, or route. So the path is always an alternative to the track laid down by the dominant value system.

Our social situation constantly tries to adjudicate between the track of the consumer market, which has such a compelling power and such visible payouts, and a path, which we are naming neighborliness, that lacks those visible rewards but is in sync with who we really want to be. We move back and forth and try to reconcile that tension all the time.

The market track might be thought of as mechanistic and guided by reason. The neighborly path is associated with personal gifts and is guided by the spirit. On the path, we are not guided by equations and algorithms. We are guided by covenant; it is only through that sacred agreement that we gain access to mystery and fallibility, which define our humanness.

The wish for safety in the free market consumer culture makes certainty enormously attractive. In the neighborly culture, certainty gives way to mystery, fallibility, and covenant. Our work is to sustain a covenant with each other and with the common good.

It is not unlike the work arising from the question “What could the modern church do to reconstitute itself?” The rise of globalization, the intensification of the expansion of the market, has put us out of covenant with our neighbors and with God. And we’ve lost our covenantal language, which means we’ve lost our memory. And so how can we think about the re-covenanting process of localizing our culture and economy?

The church has to have a conversation about what the communal disciplines that affirm faith are. It begins with a consciousness of the taken-for-granted disciplines of the market to which we all blindly adhere. This is the beginning way for the market disciplines to lose their power: examining the resistances to covenant. “You do not have enough, therefore you are not enough” is a powerful belief sustaining the market. The faith communities must believe “You are enough, and therefore you have enough.”

And so must we all.

THE COMMONS

America was not founded on a belief in the common good. The people who came to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were like-minded, but the source of their well-being was not the commons; it was the divine right of kings and their representatives, now in the form of the Massachusetts governor. Kings were commissioned by God, and it was God who therefore gave John Winthrop the right to govern. When people like Roger Williams declared that the right to rule came from the people, he was sentenced to death. He narrowly escaped the soldiers sent after him and went on to found Rhode Island. The price for publicly arguing for the commons was exile.

In his book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: Words That Remade America*, Garry Wills (2006) argues that it was Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address who transformed America's individualism-oriented Constitution, with all its checks and balances, into a vision of the common good. Lincoln is the de facto godfather of the common good.

Almost any notion of the common good butts up against the ideology of individualism. One contrast between the United States and more communal cultures such as Sweden is that our individualism runs so deep that it is practically the American creed—as if you can't get from there to the common good. Our commitment to the individual blocks out the neighbor and the neighborhood because all I care about is myself. It seeks a world of like-minded individuals. It dismisses communal-minded cultures like Sweden's as socialist.

The commons is the modern stance for a life not centered on profit and wealth. Belief in the commons says there are resources and wealth that belong to us all. It is reversing enclosure. It is a secular, political break with the commercial empire. The commons is a stance against empire that calls for the circular flow of money, for wealth to be returned to local hands. For example, in hard times, it calls for money to be created by the government instead of by interest-bearing loans from the private sector. Radical? Perhaps, but the Bank of North Dakota has been doing this since 1919.

The whole co-operative movement is another example of an alternative to the dominant market economy. It reconstructs purpose. It says that

the purpose of the business is to build community and to care for the commons. It is the alternative to privatization and empire.

The first book that sociologist Robert D. Putnam (1993) wrote was a study of the economic differences between northern and southern Italy, northern Italy being very modern and productive and southern Italy not. This investigation led him to focus on associations. He found that southern Italy had very little associational activity, whereas northern Italy did and that the nature of the business development in the north had grown out of “associational forms,” that is, sets of relationships among people. Putnam’s idea was that money and the development of business is a relational activity.

In other words, local businesses are a mirror image of local associational life. That life is just taking place with a different mode of communication, which we call money. This view is a step in the search for an alternative to the globalization mindset. It restores community and our humanity.

AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL ORDER

Neighborliness is what was found in the Old Testament wilderness. It boils down to a care for the commons, care for the well-being of the whole, that which we hold for the sake of all. Neighborliness welcomes all into community. It stands for hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger.

The market ideology produces outsiders as a side-effect; they are another externalized cost of doing business. If you are well off it serves you well to be unwilling to acknowledge the poor. To acknowledge the underclass as gifted human beings, instead of labeled people, is destabilizing to empire. The market ideology needs explanations for the poor and the marginalized that keep the load on them. We claim it is their psychology, their culture, their education, the breakdown of the family. All of these rationalizations avoid questioning the market system. They become an implicit collective agreement to create a class structure. These responses are not about the money, for the well-off could lift up the underclass at no cost to themselves. They sustain the breakdown of the commons, the evaporation of culture, driven by the market mentality.

When the commons evaporates, so does the culture. A culture is a group of people, in a place, that has a story, a history; it has a particular language, and a narrative, but it doesn't have laws and rules in the formal sense. It tells you what "our way" is, but it isn't written in a book. It's not explicit. It's in the language of the people. David Cayley (2015) again reminds us that Ivan Illich sought a name for that portion of social life that had been, remained, or might become immune to the logic of economization. His candidate was "vernacular."

If you go to a neighborhood and the people there say, "Well, the way we have handled *X* is . . .," then you know that neighborhood is a transforming place because it has a memory. In most modern neighborhoods you never hear anybody say that. Nobody would say, "Well, our way here on Judson Avenue is. . ." A culture consists of habits, and Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) talk about "habits of the heart." You do things in a particular way, and the young are socialized into it: "This is how we do it." In a consumer market system, the young are socialized into performance, entertainment, and acquisition. Not local place, local story, and communal memory.

The loss of our memory of the commons carries with it the loss of un-commodified friendship. Angeles Arrien (1993) claimed that in all of us, across all traditions and cultures, there is buried within an experience of collective life, even if it has faded. No matter our upbringing, there is a collective memory of neighborly life on our streets, in our churches, in our local businesses. It was what once powered society. Now if you use the word *collective* too often, you are associated with socialism and communism. This is the kickback from a market ideology fueled by autonomy and the triumph of the individual. This kickback does not just come from a politicized media, or the private sector; it also comes from our family members and even friends.

RESISTING THE EMPIRE

In Wales, speaking Welsh is still a live issue against the conforming and controlling effects of empire and the Mother Tongue. It's an aftershock of the time when England developed numerous ways to break the Gaelic language. The English saw stamping out Gaelic as essential to

finally putting Scotland under control, so they made the punishment for speaking the language death by hanging. The organizing question was: How do you break the culture of locality? The English answer was very instructive. They outlawed the bagpipe, they outlawed the kilt, and they outlawed the language.

Many Presbyterian churches now have one day every year when everyone in the community puts a kilt on and marches into church with bagpipes. It's a claim to their Scottish roots, but what happens is that all kinds of people who never come to church get out their kilts and come to church once a year. It may be chauvinistic, but it's an act of independence, a relic of the Scots' resistance to the English. Mardi Gras is a similar example, as are customs like celebrating the Feast of San Gennaro or the Día de los Muertos. All are acts of defiance against the mother culture, ways of keeping a local, minority, and neighborhood culture alive and well.

Observance of the Sabbath is also a protest against the restless productivity of the commercial culture. Think of the battle over Sunday closing laws. The blue laws. For a long time, in many places, you couldn't have businesses open on Sunday. This was evidence of the church's awareness of the destructive power of commerce. Often this struggle against the market empire was conducted in very legalistic ways, but it was a campaign fought on many levels.

Once upon a time Pennsylvania had a law that no inning of baseball for the Phillies or the Pirates could begin after 6 p.m. on Sunday because on Sunday night you went to church. In St. Louis and other longstanding baseball cities, clergy can still go to baseball games for a dollar. The reason is that when the teams started Sunday baseball they were afraid of resistance from the church. So clergy were given cheap tickets, but they had to sit in the upper seats.

The battle is over now. Sunday is open for business.

OFF-MARKET POSSIBILITIES

Off-modern is a term used in discussing art. There is modernism, there is post-modernism, and where do you go after that? Post-post. This has led to the term off-modern, which means we have to think of art in a context that sets modernism and its stage of development aside.

The possibility we call neighborliness might be called off-market; it represents a future where the market no longer is the center of our conversation and the market's requirements no longer shape us like a Procrustean bed. So speed, convenience, cost, efficiency, the business perspective, and the rest become no longer central to culture. They thrive, they matter, but they exist on the margin of our consciousness.

In the Bible both the Moses movement and the Jesus movement were radically off-market. They both called people to radical disciplines that resisted the powers that be. In the Moses movement you get the Ten Commandments, which are anti-Pharaoh mandates, and in the Jesus movement you get the Beatitudes, which are an imagination against Rome, the Roman Empire. The alternative to the market of the consumer culture is another kind of market, a local-producer place of exchange. An example is your community farmers market. This market keeps money local, moving in a circular way to serve the common good. Quite different from Wall Street, where the only point is to make money on money.

I used to go fairly frequently to Cuernavaca, a small city outside of Mexico City. Twice a week they had a market in a huge building. Everything in the market was from an individual producer or an individual distributor. It was rich, almost prolific. Locally produced and mass-market commodities were both there, but the spirit and the meaning of that market in that community was about the community, not the profit. So memorable.

—John

Another example is in Evanston, Illinois, where the oldest urban commune in the United States is located. It's called the Reba Place Fellowship, after the name of the street. It was founded by Mennonites, and it's very famous. They live in houses as individual families, but they meet collectively and eat collectively. Some of them have very prominent jobs in terms of income, but their agreement is they will

all live on the amount of money that the welfare system defines as poverty. And they have done that for about fifty years now. They bring in so much more money from their jobs than they need to live on that they must, as a community, decide what to do with the excess. They do not invest it in the usual sense. Instead, they buy houses to expand the community.

The Reba Place Fellowship is a community that collectively faces the question, with full intention and purpose: How do we use money? We are seeing this happen in other neighborhood efforts, in the same spirit, with other assets. One example: A neighborhood group went door to door on a couple of blocks in a lower-income neighborhood asking people what they knew well enough to teach young people. On average, people responded with four things that they knew well enough that they could teach. People mentioned things like motorcycle repair. Fishing. Cooking. And also things like how to be kind to others.

So in a two-person household, you would have eight teachables. If there are thirty houses on the block, you have 240 teachables. Let's say there's a school on the next block. Imagine the curriculum that the people on the block could provide. If you saw their gifts in terms of what they knew how to teach and then you looked at the curriculum in the schools, think how offerings from the school could be enhanced by what's on the block next to it.

Thinking this way, we open ourselves to an understanding of the gifts that are already present all around us. We begin to say our future and our productivity are related to this abundance of gifts, previously unrecognized and unused. We might call it a gift economy. We don't have a school problem today; we have a village problem. We have a village of teachers who are not teaching. When we imagine something like a gift economy, we begin building the commons and building a culture.

THE NEIGHBORLY WAY

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor. . .? The one who showed him mercy.

—Luke 10:36

The market ideology has its sacraments whereby economics is raised to a spiritual practice. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has become a sacrament of modern times. As has the measure of Gross Domestic Product. Other sacraments are new housing starts. Capital equipment backorders and inventory. Inflation and interest rates. Economic growth. These are the lead stories, front page and business page.

That liturgy is what is under question when we talk about an alternative to the consumer culture economy. The common good calls for communal disciplines and neighborly practices and habits that have everything to do with connectedness and setting up some ground rules for neighborliness and covenant.

When we talk about a more communal life, we do not literally mean a life that is homemade and hand-made. People on the neighborly path are not going to weave their own clothes, even though that's what you see in some alternative economies. Part of what is happening is the demonetization—or you might say the lesser commodification—of life. This, too, needs its rituals, liturgy, ways of keeping track.

Time-banking pioneer Edgar Cahn (1992) talks about an economy of generosity and having a bank account for generous acts. This account becomes a form of sacrament. There is a Community Connections group in Cleveland that holds a fair every Friday night. They get together, they eat, and then each person stands up and says, "This is what I need next week. And this is what I have to offer. And here's the invitation I want to make for the following week or two weeks." They are creating social structures of exchange that are not monetized; it's a liturgy.

The Cleveland gathering is convened by Tom O'Brien. He works for a foundation, which is quite a signpost to the shift afoot. Foundations have traditionally funded only the regular social services and the high-end fine arts. The Cleveland Foundation decided to do something for grassroots people. For ten years it has spent five million dollars making grants. They don't like being identified as being as a conventional grant-maker so they use the grants as an attractor. They have started two thousand projects over a ten-year period, one of which is the Friday-night gathering in Cleveland where people exchange gifts. They are building social fabric and neighborly habits.

A more communal life comes to be when a group of citizens, over time, decides what they have to invent to build a neighborhood. In this way, neighborhood connections become a movement. This is how culture is created.

Another example: National People's Action, an association of local community groups, assembles in Washington every year. People from neighborhoods all across the country come, and after all their business activities, they have a big party. At the height of the party, the oldest person there, Otto, would stand up and say, "I'm going to tell you our story." And then he would go back to the beginning of the organization and its story. And all the new people who had come to the meeting knew that, in that evening and at that place where there was food and drink and singing, they had come into a community culture. They knew its past and its ways.

That's what a culture manifests: a way of being. Otto stood up and told the story every year because the organization had new people coming in and they had to know the association's story, its particular "our way." What Otto stood for was memory. Living memory. And history. Knowing those upon whose shoulders we stand. So that's one part of culture: storytelling. It's a secular sacrament.

Culture can be the atmosphere in a room and with certain high-engagement practices, you can see and feel a shift. If you want to know how to create an atmosphere that supports kindness, it's simple: Put people in real contact with each other. In a two-hour period people connect in small groups. You see their faces change. You see their bodies relax. You see the smiles in their eyes. In a short time they are treating each other with a kindness and warmth that didn't exist when you began. It is quick, low cost, and—pardon the term—scalable.

THE ALTERNATIVE TO RESTLESS PRODUCTIVITY

Even the stork in the heavens knows its times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord.

—Jeremiah 8:7

The local living and cooperative movement makes the dominant culture very, very nervous. They will say that constructing practices and disciplines without the safety of a predictable economic path is subsistence living, which is considered to be “undeveloped.” Primitive. Pre-modern. Now we see people growing their own food, getting their clothing from a clothing exchange, joining co-operatives.

What supports the idea of neighborliness is that there is a generation now that cannot get on the market track. We have prosperity without jobs. And we have younger people who want something more than a career. Their concerns are about a set of values, a balanced life, an alternative life, a different way of handling productivity and making a living. Not moving around. Or moving up.

This means we need not despair over the unemployment picture and the economic indexes. What we see in our neighbors is a shift in consciousness given expression by a shift in the kind of economy that they are living into. Our children won't be as wealthy as we are. That's just fine. They will be healthier. They will live in a local economy where they aren't working for a global institution. They might work waiting tables. They are spending some time creating craftworks and starting local co-operatives. They are part of a community agriculture process in which they enjoy growing crops and eating healthy food. They are starting small businesses.

This is a ripening of the culture, and we are as nervous about it as we are because it is not safe or predictable. That is why the business sections of media do not call this news. But that's part of taking the alternative path; it is the modern form of going into the wilderness. An off-market journey.

This path is going to happen anyway. The question of where we are now in terms of the mainline track is based on the reality that we can produce goods and services with fewer and fewer people. John has a friend who is an economist who said to him: “John, you value work, and every economist thinks labor is a disability. We need to get rid of workers. Everything we do is to get rid of workers. This has been the track to success.” We are to the place where there are such efficiencies in the system in the commodity world that we can produce an

overwhelming variety of stuff with many, many fewer people. That is why the market is always trying to create new needs.

This is the future we are all facing. Even college graduates are would-be workers in a system that does not need them. Ivan Illich wrote a book years ago called *The Right to Useful Unemployment* (1978), which was concerned with the activities by which people are useful to themselves and others outside the production of commodities for the market. What we are facing as a society is exploring the question of what useful unemployment is. If I'm not going to be a part of the market production empire, what is my way?

This is a paradigm shift, away from depending on institutions to depending on associational life, the local life that was discovered in the wilderness of the Old Testament. In Old Testament terms, the work is to welcome the widow and the orphan and the immigrant. The modern language is welcoming people on the margin. These actions are pivotal. If we talk about a covenantal community, there is at bottom only one question: How do we treat the widow and the orphan and the immigrant? This becomes an organizing principle of an alternative narrative. And it begins with a series of covenants.

A key covenant is to see the gifts of the widow. And the orphan. And the immigrant. Anyone on the margin. We were all there once. People of any prosperity or power are always surprised when the gifts of those that they blame or look down on are revealed. This exposure of gifts is the way into the kind of community that we want. It's one of the most significant acts that we can do.

We find this hospitality nearer than we think. It is the custom of well-off schools to send their students on field trips to Africa or Latin America. The students always find the same thing. They say, "We went into the poorest hut, in the poorest neighborhood, in the poorest township, and those people had light in their eyes. They had smiles on their faces, and they welcomed us."

The instinct that creates these trips is sincere, but these are imperial journeys. We do not have to travel afar to find light, and smiles, and gifts. They are always within walking distance, in a nearby place that we are simply unaccustomed to visiting.

THE SHADOW SIDE OF COMMUNITY

There are also limits to the local life. Cultures have a shadow side. They can be dark, confining, and unkind. They don't forgive. They shun. They stone.

A focus on local can lead to parochialism. It can produce the tribalism that results in constant warfare, as in the history that we know. One of the positive things one might say about the empire is that it has often stopped warfare. It brought peace, like Pax Britannica, to quell the dangers of parochialism. As we seek the communal culture, we must come to grips with this problem: Perhaps our focus on the local will also bring with it divisiveness, its own kind of competition, some form of warfare.

One of the downsides of small communities is un-welcoming-ness, drawing the boundary against outsiders. You could live somewhere for ten years, and you're still not really a member. Exclusive cultures are a part of our wish for certainty. They have much of what we seek—ritual, memory, habits of connection. But there is a difference between useful habits and fundamentalism. The certainty of fundamentalism leads to violence. This is often laid at the feet of the poor in the world. It is also a fear that the values of our cultures are disappearing, and so we gather in tribal enclosures.

When communities come to power—even communities of covenant—they begin to formulate self-predictive rules. In the religious traditions what you get are rules of holiness that right away begin to stratify people and organize people and administer people so that you are soon back on the system track. The point is, even the neighborly way requires great intentionality because it regularly is distorted by the seductive power of control. The Church, even with its covenantal language and well-meaning, went through a phase in the 1990s you could call a big-church growth movement; the ideology was that you could grow a bigger church because people like homogenous assemblages. So you gather all the people who are alike. It works. Witness the mega-churches—global, prosperous, and like-minded.

Walter was on a program with representatives from the Episcopal House of Bishops and the author of *The Big Sort*, a stunning data-filled

book documenting the move in America toward our own kind (Bishop, 2009). The Bishops were worried that their Dioceses were turning red or blue. That's the thesis of *The Big Sort*: People now move into neighborhoods of like-minded people. Mobility is the modern vehicle for encouraging exclusive communities, at every economic level, and we are becoming ever more homogenous.

There is no real way around this aspect of our humanity. We hope for forgiveness and hospitality, but there is too much evidence they are in short supply. Small communities, traditionally, have dilemmas and always will. The consumer culture did not create original sin. The point is, there's nothing in what we're saying that gets rid of any human weaknesses. Departing the consumer culture is just changing the context. It's believing that a context of cooperation and concern for the commons will increase the likelihood of welcome and forgiveness.