



COMMENTARIES

We sent an early version of the book to some colleagues to ask them three questions: (1) What strikes you about the book? What point stands out to you? (2) What do you want to know more about? and (3) What kind of people in your world would find this book useful?

Their comments activated changes in our writing, and we also thought that many of the comments were worthy in their own right. They often said in simpler terms what the book is about. We have gathered these here.

ROBERT INCHAUSTI

Robert Inchausti is the author of five books, including *Subversive Orthodoxy* and *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People*. He edited *The Pocket Thomas Merton* and *Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on Writing*.

This is a succinct take on our collective neurosis—our perversion of the idea of freedom into a desire to live in isolated imaginary worlds of our own creation and control. Everyone has a Facebook page; every Facebook page a “following,” and every following a would-be career. We need a new collective vision and cultural narrative to save us from this runaway megalomania—and this book clearly shows us where the battle-line resides.

You did not try to do too much but rather attend to the big picture: the big lie, the over-arching mistake, the great folly that fuels our anger, alienation, and narcissism. You lift the curse by naming our demons—ferreting out their secret Rumpelstiltskin identities. I particularly liked the short history of consumerism with its list of odd moral and

historical “turns.” It offered a new way to consider exactly what has transformed all of us into products and “success” stories of one kind or another—however puffed-up and imaginary.

All those who suspect their highest aspirations are being perverted and used against them by men and women of greater personal ambition and psychological sophistication [will find this book useful]. It’s a book for rebels, innocents, idealists, and the sick at heart.

CORMAC RUSSELL

Managing director of Nurture Development, faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, and author of *Asset-Based Community Development: Looking Back to Look Forward*.

Throughout, [what is striking is] the argument that the ideology of the Free Market dominates our cultural narrative and shapes the way we think about everything is clear. Also the view that the serious challenge to the market ideology strikes right at the heart of that ideology and not just the content and the form the ideology takes.

We are not just left in opposition of the market; this book re-enchants the reader with the commons and community but not in a way that romanticizes community. It’s a dance; deeply political and profoundly public. But then to interpret all that within a faith perspective is genius. The way you all have created this narrative seems to me to be potentially attractive to all faiths and none, the invitation back to abundance, fallibility, mystery, and the commonwealth is universal. As I read it I was reminded of the scripture passage Matthew 10:16: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” This book counsels us in the way of shrewdness and innocence, but also reminds me in any case that innocence is profoundly powerful and consequential.

You all explain how “free” market ideology is the lens through which everyone views the world; through this lens the landscape looks bleak, hence the harmful but ubiquitous notion that we

should manage scarcity by means of privatization. You show up the so-called ethic of the marketplace: “for me to win you must lose.” And then how you ground this in real-life examples and metaphors, for example, how we learn this maxim from the age of four when we are taught that for me to get an “A” or “B” grade, another kid has to get a “C” or a “D.” The market ideology contaminates every aspect of our lives, from the moment of birth onwards. “It is the sea in which we swim.”

I also enjoyed the arguments that our politicians are the products of our consciousness. That if we believe we are the “effect” of their decisions and actions, they will become technocratic not democratic. Conversely, if we believe we are the “cause” of our own and, consequently, their actions, they will serve us.

The book challenges the institutional assumption: that institutions and professionals can unilaterally provide us with a good life, and unashamedly points out that it is one of the most anti-democratic notions there is.

What I’d like to know more about is why the three of you choose to write this book? What was your journey? Why you three, why now? What brought you together? What have you learned from each other? In a sense you have created a commonwealth of your lives’ journey, and that’s a story worth sharing in my opinion.

I also find myself wondering about the route home, back to community and back to the commons, the prodigal journey. The book tells me about the Prodigal Son’s journey away from home, it tells me about the blessings and gifts he’s left behind, it tells me of all the downsides of the marketplace he left home for, but somehow the potential for a modern-day homecoming, while touched on, seems less clear, less proportionate to the other phases of the journey in the book. I wonder therefore whether there’s another chapter on the Prodigal’s return that makes the invisible hosting and hospitality of returners and the outgrowth of community and commons in neighborhoods across the world visible. I should say I know that that is done throughout the book, so this point may not be relevant; this exercise is highly subjective, but I found myself reading the book and throughout wondering where the Prodigal Son was going to appear.

WARD MAILLIARD

This is a quest to rediscover liturgy of the neighborhood.

Whales singing
 across the deep.
 We mortals feel the longing,
sweet sadness
 of leviathan shapes
 in liquid ballet
twining,
calling to other.
 We land animals
 must now learn to bow
 to something
 more ancient.

The book delves into the alternate possibilities, and begins to develop language for a new conversation. It touches on the areas that matter in daily life. It addresses the misdirection of consumerism and provides a map for the wilderness. Both prose and poetry.

A few points to cheer about:

“Trust is the glue of the communal narrative.”

“The point is to overcome our isolation.”

“The collectiveness has been taken out of the spiritual experience.”

“Community is the reconstruction of individual well-being through the well-being of the whole.” and the rest of that paragraph !!!!

Question: “What to do with a broken story?”

“The act of imagination is to believe in the wilderness.”

“The right use of wealth is an emotional and spiritual question.”

“Mobility and isolation work hand in hand in the empire narrative.”

“Commodity replaces narrative.”

“Totalitarian regimes always have to call things by their wrong name.”

“So the path is always an alternative to the track that is laid down by the dominant narrative.”

“When the commons evaporate, so does the culture.”

“Observance of the Sabbath is also a struggle against the market empire.”

“The argument against the neighborly way is that we don’t have time for that.”

“Freedom in faithfulness.”

“Every local place has to create a unique thing, something that cannot be taken to scale.”

I think anyone and everyone who has “gone over the wall” or contemplated leaving the land of Pharaoh [will find the book useful]. You are mapping the wilderness. The intuitive yearning of sensing that we need to do some things differently is present in so many. I meet young people all the time who intuitively know that they need to find alternatives, but there is no effective description of what that means, or how it pertains to the specifics of an actual life. Hence, the attempt to live in the wilderness is short lived before re-absorption.

Final musing,

We always have a chance to end empire.

What holds us back?

The inducements of Pharaoh without,
and alas, the pharaoh within,
continually canonizing comfort, security, the known way.

On this tri-partate altar we sacrifice
health, joy, family, sacredness, mystery,
and even this precious moment.

Busy is our virus of choice,
an excuse safe.
The hungry ghost consumes,
never satisfied and fearful,
Pharaoh is reborn.

DAVID CAYLEY

Writer and broadcaster, retired after forty years with CBC Radio, whose books include *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.

I think some of the terms and concepts need to be more fully developed. I see that the book's purpose is, broadly speaking, prophetic rather than analytic, but even so I think it would be good to put more flesh on terms like "the commons." What were commons? I think that Lewis Hyde in his *Common as Air* does a good job in showing the complexity of the regime that governed common lands before their enclosure. It's hard to imagine the reinstatement of such a regime. So what does it mean concretely to imagine a restoration of commons.

[One of my recent] essay[s] begins with the story of Antonio Nebrija (1441–1522), a Spanish scholar who, in 1492, approached Queen Isabella of Spain in the hope of winning her support for his plan to write a formal grammar of the Castilian language. In that way he told her the untutored and unruly speech of her subjects could be brought under control and a new instrument of government created for the overseas dominions she was about to acquire. "Language," he says, "has always been the consort of empire." Nebrija anticipated great things from Columbus's voyage to the West, then still in progress, but he tried to persuade the queen that his grammar might be an even more auspicious undertaking. Spain would acquire a language comparable to the languages of antiquity, and the wild speech of her peoples would be brought under domestic cultivation.

Illich, shockingly, treats this quite differently. He sees Nebrija's grammar as the draft of "a declaration of war against subsistence," by which Illich means roughly things that people can do for themselves, like their ability to speak, acquire livelihood, live, and die outside of formal institutions. What glimmers at the horizon for Illich is not the flowering of national literatures but Orwell's Newspeak, the possibility of a totally administered language.

The vernacular, for Illich, is a figure of spontaneity, referring, by definition, to a domain that can neither be economized nor brought

under professional management and manipulation. Such domains have only a fugitive existence in the contemporary world, and Illich was no more successful in establishing the concept than he was in rehabilitating gender. What he was seeking, as I now see it, was a science of complementarity—a view of things in which everything exists by reason of and in relation to its opposite. However, I don't think this is always clear in Illich's writing because it is sometimes obscured by a satirical and anti-modernist spirit that can make his critique seem more total than, at his best, he wants it to be.

DOUGLAS LARSEN SELL

ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] pastor,
Spring Green, Wisconsin

Perhaps the title might be “Who Is My Neighbor?” The question that Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. That parable is to me a theme of the last third of the book.

The working title reminds me of Luther's idea of God's Two Kingdoms. And of Niebuhr's Christ and Culture. . . is Christ above, in, or under culture?

MICHAEL COFFEY

Rev. Michael Coffey, pastor of First English Lutheran Church (ELCA), Austin, Texas; author of *Mystery Without Rhyme or Reason: Poetic Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary*, Wipf & Stock, Publishers. Blogger at www.ocotillopub.org.

The book's attempt to dismantle the hold on our imaginations that the market economy has is important and central. The contrast between contract and covenant is helpful. The hopeful exploration of what neighborly life looks like once reimagined is what I value and would hope to hear more of.

I would love to hear more exploration of the economic themes of the book in conversation with some of the current economists who

are making similar critiques of the market ideology. Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and even Thomas Piketty could be helpful conversation partners in offering both a critique of the current ideology and practical suggestions for alternative ways to imagine the economy for the sake of the common good.

I think for anyone who is under forty, it could be valuable to suggest how technology can be used for its own subversion, which is often what young people are using it for.

This book is for pastors, thoughtful lay people, those outside the church who might find this alternative vision of faith and faithful living an appealing inroads to exploring faith and scripture.

WALTER T. DAVIS, JR.

Professor of the Sociology of Religion (emeritus), San Francisco Theological Seminary, whose recent publications include *Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide* and *Zionism and the Quest for Justice in the Holy Land*, co-edited with Donald E. Wagner.

The whole book is a *tour de force*. You asked us to “quickly read.” I tried this, and my first impression was too much repetition of the same ideas. Then I realized that this book requires slow, meditative, reflective reading. So, I slowed down and began to see the interrelatedness of the ideas in a new light, how each repetition develops a different nuance and deepens the analysis of a particular aspect of the free market consumer culture.

Now I see the book as a spiral like a descending ladder: “every round goes deeper, deeper. . . .” Maybe what you have created resembles a symphony wherein one theme is repeated again and again, but each time interwoven with new themes.

I am struck by the style. You took the gloves off. No hedging or qualifying, just straight talk challenging the Golden Calf. Rarely have I read so much in so few words.

The personal comments gave the text a more intimate tone, as did the many examples of neighborly covenants. The sections on mystery

and the place for God open up for me reflections about fundamentalism in both science and religion.

I wonder if you might add a paragraph or two on how the free market consumer ideology requires a totalist military and foreign policy. This may be pushing the envelope a bit, but it is so central to the current system that its inclusion would strengthen your analysis (imho).

Preachers, local congregations, and denominational leaders with responsibilities in the areas of justice, peacemaking, and relief assistance [would consider this book useful].

ARTHUR LYONS

I wish I had been in on your conversations! I am fully in accord with what I understand to be your main point—that as a society we need a new imagination about priorities, including the non-material world and relationships that we now either don't see or we believe (without evidence) to be impossible. It's our entire culture that's at stake, and it needs to change. Reformative actions will flow from new ways of thinking.

Among the many specific ideas I like are the way you develop the notion of *kairos*. . . . The good ending will come if we each keep doing our part; we never know what the precipitating event will be. In a word, hope. Your concluding statement from the *Marigold Hotel* movie is a perfect tie-up.

I like how you clarify the costs, or the things we lose, because of our belief in the free market consumer ideology, for example, your section "Convenience Displaces Capacity." Like any culture, the free market ideology comes with blinders that allow us to see only the culture's real or presumed benefits, not its costs. Someone with experience outside the culture (in this case, you) is needed to make the costs visible.

I work with some groups trying to keep alcohol and other drugs away from teenagers, mostly high school students. Some of the youth say things like: Why not get stoned? Our parents all want us not only to get into college, but go to the best schools. We can't all go to the best schools. It's impossible. Why try?

These teens, their parents, and the school personnel who are afflicted with the "highest-grades" and "best-school" mentality are my first

candidates for people who would find the book useful, if we could open their eyes to understand it.

I also do work on tax policy. Nearly everyone I meet—from government officials who collect and spend tax money to individuals who pay taxes—explicitly believes that it is a citizen’s duty to take advantage of every possible loophole in the tax code and to pay the smallest amount of tax possible. Virtually no one begins with a sense of community or the realization that we are in sociopolitical relationships with each other, and taxes support *our* community.

I see this as one particular manifestation of the harmful individualism you discuss. As a society, we could have much more reasonable conversations about tax and spending policies—and an actually reasonable tax code—if either (a) enough policy-makers read and understood your book or (b) enough citizen-voters read and understood your book to impose a more rational discourse on politicians. (In my judgment, (b) is more likely to succeed.)

MARK ANIELSKI

Happiness economist and author of *The Economics of Happiness: Building Genuine Wealth*.

The book nails down that the current system is a shift from a covenant people living in relative “harmony” on the common “wealth” to one of contract law founded on an economic ideology of individualism, individual property rights, greed, hedonism, and utility maximization (more stuff is better). You don’t try to identify the source of this ideology. I would argue that it was amplified by the work of Ayn Rand, who influenced the twentieth century economists, including Milton Friedman and Allan Greenspan; that society is “dead” and altruism is not a human characteristic.

You remind us of the wisdom that First Nations (Native Americans) still retain today: the truth of abundance as found in nature. It is no wonder we domination nations wanted to suppress celebrations of abundance like the potlatch! The potlatch was a mimic of nature in how nature gave without expectation and in rich abundant flourishing.

Nature gives without expectations of any return including our thank you. This is how the coastal First Nations lived. It was honorable to give from one's bounty to the rest of the community. This was followed by the next family who hosted the potlatch. The Israelites did not have such a practice. While God showed Moses and the Israelites to trust His mercy and abundance (Manna from the sky) they were very stubborn and wanted to return to the slavery and good eats of Egypt rather than die in the desert. First Nations never had that experience and somehow had wisdom that no other nation or place on earth seemed to have experienced.

The book will hopefully lift many hearts and minds with hope that indeed "home and neighborhood is where the heart is; where find community, joy and, most importantly, the truth of abundance."

It could spark a new conversation of the joy of neighborliness and relationships. When people learn again the truth of abundance and the joy of giving and receiving, the dark era of the slavery of greed and materialism will be over. The Wizard of Oz(s) will be unveiled for who they are; timid men with no joy in their hearts.