

Read the Book

NEXT, by Amitai Etzioni

Public Perspective introduces "Read the Book," a new department featuring excerpts from soon-to-be published works in the fields of public opinion, survey research, and society.

The Next Grand Dialogue: A New Counterculture, Religious Revival?

The great success of the economy in the 1990s made Americans pay more attention to the fact that there are numerous moral and social questions of concern to the good society that capitalism has never aspired to answer and that the state should not promote. These include moral questions such as what we owe our children, our parents, our friends, and our neighbors, as well as people from other communities, including those in far away places. Most important, we must address the question: what is the *ultimate purpose of our personal and collective endeavors?* Is ever greater material affluence our ultimate goal and source of meaning? When is enough enough? What are we considering the good life? And specifically, *can the good society be built on ever increasing levels of affluence? Or, should we strive to center it around other values, those of mutuality and spirituality?*

The journey to the good society can benefit greatly from the observation, supported by a great deal of social science data, that ever increasing levels of material goods are not a reliable source of human well being and contentment—let alone the basis for a morally sound society. To cite but a few studies of a large body of findings:

Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey found that the level of one's socio-economic status had meager effects on one's "sense of



well-being" and no significant effect on "satisfaction with life-as-a-whole." And Jonathan Freedman discovered that levels of reported happiness did not vary greatly among the members of different economic classes, with the exception of the very poor who tended to be less happy than others. David G. Myers reports that while per capita disposable (after-tax) income in inflation-adjusted dollars almost exactly doubled between 1960

and 1990, 32% of Americans reported that they were "very happy" in 1993, almost the same proportion as did in 1957 (35%). Although economic growth slowed since the mid-1970s, Americans' reported happiness was remarkably stable (nearly always between 30 and 35%) across both high-growth and low-growth periods.

These and other such data help us realize that the pursuit of well-being through ever higher levels of consumption is Sisyphusian. When it comes to material goods, enough is never enough. This is not an argument in favor of a life of sackcloth and ashes, of poverty and self denial. The argument is that once basic material needs (what Abraham Maslow called "creature comforts") are well sated and securely provided for, additional income does not add to happiness. On the contrary, the evidence—not some hippie, touchy-feely, LSD induced hallucination—shows that profound contentment is found in nourishing ends-based relationships, in bonding with others, in community building and public service, and in cultural

and spiritual pursuits. Capitalism, the engine of affluence, has never aspired to address the whole person; at best it treats a person as a *homo economicus*. Even statist socialism subjugated rather than inspired. It is left to the evolving values and culture of centrist societies to fill the void.

Nobel laureate Robert Fogel showed recently that periods of great affluence are regularly followed by what he calls Great Awakenings, and that we are due for one in the near future. While it is quite evident that there is

a growing quest for purposes deeper than conspicuous consumption, our ability to predict which specific form this yearning for spiritual fulfilment will take may well be not given to us. There are some who firmly believe that the form must be a religious one because all others do not speak to the most profound matters that trouble the human soul nor provide sound moral guidance. These believers find good support in numerous indicators that there has been a considerable measure of religious revival in practically all forms of American religion over the last decades. The revival is evident not merely in the number of people who participate in religious activities and the frequency of their participation in these activities, but also in the stronger, more involving, and stricter kinds of commitments many are making to religion. Others see the spiritual revival as taking a more secular form ranging from New Age cults to growing interest in applied ethics.

Aside from making people more profoundly and truly content individuals, a major and broadly based upward shift on the Maslovian scale is a prerequisite for being able to fully address some of most tantalizing problems plaguing modern societies, whatever form it may take. Such a shift in priorities is required before we can come into harmony with our environment, because these higher priorities put much less demand on scarce resources than lower ones. And such a new set of priorities may well be the only conditions under which those who are well endowed would be willing to support serious reallocation of wealth and power, as their personal fortunes would no longer be based on amassing ever larger amounts of consumer goods. In addition, transitioning to a knowledge-based economy would free millions of people

(one hopes all of them, gradually) to relate to each other mainly as members of families and communities, thus laying the social foundations for a society in which ends-based relations dominate while instrumental ones are well contained.

The upward shift in priorities, a return to a sort of moderate counterculture, a turn toward voluntary simplicity, requires a grand dialogue about our personal and shared goals. Intellectuals and the media can help launch such a dialogue and model the new forms of behavior. Public leaders can nurse the recognition of these values by moderating consumption at public events and ceremonies, and by celebrating those whose achievements are compatible with a good society rather than a merely affluent one. But ultimately, such a shift lies in changes in our hearts and minds, in our values and conduct—what Robert Bellah called the habits of the heart. We shall not travel far toward a good society unless such a dialogue is soon launched and advanced to a good, spiritually uplifting conclusion.

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