The Changing Human Landscape

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By the time one comes close to the three-quarter century mark in life, the entire human landscape has been altered almost beyond recognition. If one lives one's entire life in one town, the alteration of the landscape is very gradual and is easy to adjust to, I believe. If one lives away from one's home community, however, as is the case with me, one comes at some point to a realization of the scope of the human loss. One realizes that not only is the older generation gone, but much of one's own generation has been wiped out by time. The inevitable reaction is a sense of terrible poignancy or shock. One sees that the fabric of the society one knew has been riddled by the deaths that have occurred. In life, as time passes one becomes accustomed to, or at least accepting, of the punctures in the material fabric of structures, streets and neighborhoods, though even that can be hard to live with and can produce a terrible sense of loss and deprivation which results in alienation from the world around oneself. But the disappearance of the familiar human landscape is far more cruel and emotionally debilitating. It is amazing no matter how rationally we understand the inevitability of changing human generations, the actual fact comes as a surprise. How, one asks, can one's friends and acquaintances be gone? Philosophically and theologically, one may understand that generations are like fields of grass which live and die in their season, but emotionally it is very difficult to accept the reality of the end of a human season in a particular locale. And it must have been incredibly hard for the peoples of Britain and Europe who saw an entire generation die in World War I before it had had time to live a normal lifespan. Britain, for example, surely was full of empty streets, that is, streets where the youth that would have gone on living there, marrying and having children, were devoid of life. The young had been engulfed in battles that wiped them out on a wholesale basis. I don't know how their elders at home managed to carry on or how they retained their sanity. And I suppose, my complaint about the normal process of death and disappearance is unreasonable. Nevertheless, even the normal operation by which time winnows out a generation is hard to bear when one addresses it directly.

As I look around at the human scene of my youth and young manhood in Charleston, S.C., my home, I find myself reciting a litany of removal by death, saying over and over again "He is gone," or "She is gone." Each name brings back a face and a personality, a personal history and a family or social setting from childhood onward which is remembered in full.

Remembering the lives of family and friends deepens awareness of the miracle of human individuality. We may put people in categories, but we also realize that no two people are identical. Clones do not exist in nature. Yes, one may resemble one's great-grandfather or have the interests of a grandmother. But there always are subtle differences. That this is possible with the billions of people in the

world is truly amazing but it is a fact of life. Thus when an individual is subtracted from life—from a community or larger society—the loss always is of a distinctive element. Hence people can't be replaced in a small or large crowd. These groupings form patterns, a network of individuals. And with the death of the human participants we lose a pattern that has meaning and comfort for us. We hold tight to the little networks as personal protection against the vagaries of life, the buffeting and stresses that result from the encounters of life. Long after many of the participants are gone we remember the sense of well-being derived from the small, protective groups. My friend Russell Kirk often wrote of the "little platoons" in life as the real basis of a civilized existence. Actually, "platoons" may be too extensive a concept. Often one's happiness is derived from membership in a circle of no more than ten or twelve people. And how easily these groups are shattered by time.

As we move through our thirties and forties we give little thought to the shattering of our small networks. They seem permanent but, of course, they are not. They are fragile and vulnerable to the operation of time. Inevitably, they all disappear. We don't look forward to being survivors in human groupings or communities, but a select few—selected by genetics—come to have that place in life. We never know who will be a survivor and who will be a relatively early casualty. It isn't necessarily blissful to be a survivor. Unless one believes one is joining the communion of the saints.

Even those people who have very strong religious faith and who believe that a better life awaits them in the hereafter find it very hard to deal with the changing human landscape caused by death. One of the oddities of life is that one can't tell in advance who the survivors will be and who will be among the early casualties. The latter often includes some of those who appear to be the strongest and healthiest whereas some of the most frail live longest—another mystery of life. Death coming with the changing human landscape has been a constant of life since the beginning. Both in the time of the Neanderthals and of emerging homo sapiens, humankind consisted of very small groups. They lived on the edge of vast icefields and in the midst of hostile seas. At this distance in time it is impossible to gauge the feelings of the small populations in a large, forbidding world. A death in one of the small groups on the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, for instance, while not unexpected in an age of people with very limited lifespans, must have been felt acutely as a severe diminishment of their society. Perhaps this is one reason why they created such extraordinary stone structures, such as the Ring of Brogdor, huge standing stones in a circle, as a memorial to their fellows. Modern people are tempted to ignore or dismiss the deep emotional feelings and needs of prehistoric people. But huminids were always acutely aware of the importance of a life and the need to honor the dead with ritual. The burial places of Neanderthals have been located and evidence remains in some cases of flowers having been placed on the graves. There is evidence of the same feelings of loss that moderns experience when family or friends depart this world. And perhaps there is a measure of comfort in the knowledge that our pain is shared with those who lived thousands of years ago. Not everyone will find comfort in this approach. But for those who try to relate to loss in their personal circle to the totality of human experience with loss, this may

indeed prove helpful. Certainly, this is true in my case. I find that I am better able to deal with personal loss and change in the human landscape if I understand loss on the part of other equally human people in the most distant periods. I felt this when I first learned of the discovery of the body of a Neolithic man dubbed the “Iceman” by scholars. He was discovered a few years ago in the mountains of northern Italy near the border with Austria. The Iceman has fascinated the scholarly world because his body and clothing had been preserved intact in the ice during the five thousand years since he died in blizzard conditions apparently on his way home into what is today Austria. Those who discovered and examined this human find were surprised to find out how well he was attired, with well-made garments and moccasins. He carried with him all that he needed, including a bag with mushrooms which, it is believed, were used as a sort of antibiotic. The details of his clothing and of his physical condition have been reported to a worldwide audience. But, to the best of my knowledge, no one has related his death in a storm to the feelings of loss that must have been felt by those close to him who awaited his return to his home settlement. It is not customary in archaeology to speculate or think about the human feelings of ancient people. Moderns can deal with physical factors but not with essential qualities of humanity.

We should be able to transport ourselves back in time to identify with those long ago people in the Iceman’s home community and identify with their overwhelming sense of loss at the failure of their kinsman and friend to return from his journey over the mountains. They must have looked and asked for him, speculating on how he might have been delayed. Finally, they must have recognized that some accident had befallen him and he would not be returning to them. We have no idea at this remove whether that they had anything like religious consolation available to them, any concept of another life when they would be reunited with him. He might have been essential to the survival of the little group. The loss of even one person in that remote time was more acutely felt because of the smallness of the human groups. The smallness contributed to the vulnerability of life. Neolithic communities were marginal because of their size and the threat of natural disasters and disease. Death in our times means a disturbing change in the human landscape but doesn’t pose the threat of extinction. In modern times there is much talk of the individual as apart from the group, not deeply dependent on others. In truly ancient times this notion would have been inconceivable as the small social unit was, necessarily, so tightly bonded. Individualism, then, is a modern conceit. And in settled communities in our own time there is strong awareness of the importance of community and social bonding. Of course, we have lost a lot of that awareness over the centuries. In medieval times every phase, aspect and institution was viewed as having a sacramental character. It is reasonable to conclude that this framework for life better prepared people for the changes in the human landscape brought about by death. At this point in history, it is unlikely that modern society will go back to the forms of the middle ages, though many individuals will continue to see the phases of life in sacramental terms.

Indeed the depersonalization which is characteristic of modern life at the end of one millennium is likely to increase in the twenty-first century, with its

fascination with technology rather than emotional and spiritual needs. And this may well produce great loneliness, anxiety and heartbreak. Indeed life in the technically advanced societies renders the inner life of people increasingly vulnerable and full of hurt. Society today is focused on developing new technical systems which are said to offer "revolutionary" change, but this change is strictly technical and economic. The proponents and engineers of this change pay no attention to the inner lives and stresses of people who, as was the case of all peoples in the past, are deeply troubled by the reality or specter of human loss, the dislocation of their human circles and interior existence. Thus people in the advanced societies face a grim prospect. Their societies aren't seeking ways to help people with the age-old inner concerns but are concentrating on externals that don't really enhance life.

After all, the inner life is the real life. One doesn't know, of course, whether this technocratic Western approach will continue to rule. It may so impoverish the spirit in advanced countries that people will rebel. The deep, underlying disappointment with modernism may account for the current success of Islam in many parts of the world. It offers an alternative view to the current Western approach to life. And Christianity gives every sign of a vast renewal in the Third World countries, which reject many of the tenets and ways of Western modernism. These counter movements to modernism indicate a widespread spiritual hunger at a time when the small units of life are besieged in many ways.

On the intellectual and spiritual level a deep faith enables one to transcend the idea and certainty of death. It readies one for the inevitable. Even so, as I stated initially, there remains the very human sense of immediate loss and deprivation. It is that sense that one must deal with, perhaps even society must deal with, in getting to the end of this life, to the point where the human landscape we grew up with has been transformed beyond all recognition. And the answer, I suspect, it that there isn't an answer to meeting this need. We have to live with what seems unbearable and still not collapse into despair or desperation. We ought to recognize the burden we are forced to bear in this regard and develop, as much as possible, a courageous stoicism for day to day life. Human beings have grappled with the fact of death and deprivation since the most ancient times as evidenced in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the great stoic philosopher, devoted much of his *Meditations* to reconciling the need for a strong, intelligent, well-ordered life with the overriding fact of death. Christianity, of course, says it is possible to transcend death, to end death's dominion over man. John Donne, the most sensual of English poets, also affirmed transcendence and the end of death's dominion. Great minds and great spirits have shown themselves capable of reconciling the facts of life and death. But the ordinary human being, modern or pre-modern, finds this kind of reconciliation a staggering task. The philosopher, the thinker, the theologian, and the poet have gifts that enable them to view the changing human landscape with a calm and acceptance that ordinary human beings would love to possess. For most of us, it is necessary to struggle very hard in all our latter years with the fact that "they are gone"—the familiar human elements of our world in the prime of our life. *Ω*