

The Defaults Don't Work

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Christmas in California

Christmas is a celebration of the triumph of humanity over winter, and for many, a celebration of the triumph of Christ over mortality. When the world is at its bleakest, and hungriest, and coldest, its rituals show us that we can survive and thrive with nothing but the essential tools of our humanity: community, celebration, and love. Every bit of its symbology and ritual expresses this, the evergreen trees, the holly boughs and mistletoe, the lights, candles, fires, caroling, sweets and family. It is designed to bring a nucleus of joy and light into a season that would be otherwise dark and isolating.

In December, California is at its most verdant and bountiful. The streams are flowing. The hills are green. The monarchs have returned to their coastal groves. All the promise for the next growing season is raining down from the heavens. It's a time for getting out doors, enjoying the cool air, camping, biking. There's no darkness and cold to drive back. Christmas inserts itself in the midst of this, but bears no relationship to its surroundings. Its collection of cultural tools are unnecessary.

Consider the evergreen. In deciduous climates, evergreens stand alone in the barren winter woods as a testament that life goes on. In California, evergreens grow in cloud forests that are green and misty all year, bedecked with lush ferns and epiphytes. When young and living-room sized, the evergreens of coastal California are ugly scraggly things. They reach a state of majesty only after 100 years and 100 feet of growth. They can live longer than Christianity, and it is a sacrilege to ever cut them down.

The spiritual evergreen of California is the Manzanita, whose deep green leaves and burgundy trunk color the chaparral hills throughout the summer even as all the grassland around them turns brown and dormant. As the evergreen resists the ice of winter that seems to snuff out life all around, the Manzanita survives the grass fires that do the same. But a cut manzanita wouldn't grace a living room with anything but a pile of dead leaves.

The event of greatest seasonal significance in California is the return of the winter rains. For those that have survived the fire and drought for another year, it marks the end of a constant whining anxiety. It portends that the rivers will swell, that the reservoirs will fill, that the hills will blossom again with orange poppies and purple lupine, that everything will be washed clean of dust and soot and the residue of pesticide. But it passes by unmarked. We have no cultural ritual to celebrate the relief it brings together.

Instead, we put inflatable snowmen on green lawns that will never see snow. We put icicle lights on gutters that will never see ice. We dress up in warm clothes in the parking lots of indoor air-conditioned ice skating rinks, and shed them as soon as we leave. We sing songs about one horse open sleighs, and explain to our children that there are places in the world where water turns to ice when you leave it outside.

Remembering the Ohio winters of my youth, tepid as they were, I try to recreate the feeling of seeing your breath, and bracing against the cold and dark. I put on Loreena Mckennitt. I make hot chocolate. I put a fireplace video loop on the TV, as actual fireplace fires are illegal in every California city. But the feeling that this is a holiday not for this place is inescapable. It becomes an ersatz mimicry of a mythical German wintertime that few of us have ever personally seen.

Every detail

Once you've noticed this deficiency, this incongruity, in a tradition as sacred and beloved as Christmastime, you start to see it everywhere, in every detail of our lives. Our habits and norms are adaptations for a world that no longer exists, economically, technologically, climatically, and most importantly, ethically.

If you look around from where you're sitting now, you'll probably notice a few immediately. Our lawns, at the cost of the state's water, mimic the Midwest. The midwest's lawns mimic England. England's lawns mimic the estates of lords. The estates of lords mimic the pastoral past where grazing land for sheep was key to prosperity. We still have the lawns, but we don't have the sheep, and we definitely don't have the water.

Houses are still being built today with both a formal dining room and a kitchen nook, both a living room and a family room. We've added the rooms to accommodate the way we actually want to live, but the vestigial ones still hang on like a whale's hip bones. As our number of bathrooms has multiplied they've brought their commensal bathtubs along with them, even though few but young children regularly take baths.

The stories we tell our children describe small bits of civilization surrounded by wilderness, but we live in a world where small bits of wilderness are surrounded by civilization. Children learn more about the food they could have foraged in medieval Europe than about the food they can forage in a neighborhood park. We teach them exhaustively about the megafauna left in the world, that they will never encounter outside of zoos.

In the fall in the eastern United States, these tropical tasting fruit grow on every third tree in the forest. In 20 years of living around them, I never met anyone who knew they existed, even though you could walk into a city park, shake a tree, and have them tumble onto the ground.

We live in a time of enormous change. The basic facts about the tools we use to live our lives are overhauled every generation, faster than we can create names for them, let alone norms. Every fragment of equestrian equipment has a name with deep Indo-European roots, but the objects we interact with a hundred times per day are stuck with words like hamburger menu.

As the climate changes, even the land around us is shifting faster than we can fully understand it. We now no longer know, and cannot know, whether to treat extraordinary weather as once-in-a-generation events, or part of a trajectory, and so our cultural understanding of things as simple as “where to build buildings” has a halflife of 30 years.

People are not born knowing how to be happy. We are also not good at inventing the circumstances and tools for our own happiness. We learn how to lead a happy fulfilling life primarily through imitation, not through introspection. This process of absorbing norms from our environment happens automatically, and its result, our culture, is invisible to us. We can only see it in contrast to an alternative. Even then, we see the differences in another culture as a set of choices within that culture, but not within our own. “We” are always the “normal” ones. Any practice that is shared between all the cultures we know about might as well be a fact of nature, because we cannot even notice it, let alone interrogate it. This gap, between our affinity for tradition, nostalgia, and conformity, and the actual tumult of the world, leaves us without the tools to thrive.

We imitate the lives of the people around us, but the candidate lives we have to imitate are all Christmas in California. We choose the defaults instinctively, without even the awareness that we’re doing it. But when they don’t work, they are still invisible to us. It seems implausible, when you’re doing the same thing as everyone else around you, that the thing you’re doing could be wrong. We look around for something to blame, but the only thing we find is ourselves, so we blame ourselves, and our imagination stops there.

Parenthood

Nowhere is this tension more apparent than around careers and parenting. 100 years ago, men left what had been a primarily agrarian lifestyle and began to work in factories outside of the home. For the first time, children during the day had only their mother’s presence as supervision, affection, and role-model. Children began compulsory schooling, and their most salient contact became not any adult, but rather a pool of similar aged peers. 40 years ago, women won for themselves the right to shape the world in any way they wish, rather than being limited to shaping the home and the next generation. And the worlds of children became even more focused on their peers, school, and childcare, and less focused on adult culture and work.

These two changes to the raising of children are among the most profound changes to the rhythm of human life in human history, and our culture has not yet recovered from the shock.

Our primary tool of coping has thus far been denial. We've forced ourselves to accept all manners of social fictions about parenthood, some by convention and some by law. We pretend to believe that we can expect a pregnant woman to work as hard as anyone else. We pretend to believe that we can expect sleep-deprived parents of a newborn to work as hard as anyone else on the day that their finite (and in some states negligible) parental leave ends. We pretend to believe that parents can devote as much of their mental energy to work as young, ambitious, single people. And we pretend to believe that none of these should have an impact on a person's career trajectory cumulatively over time.

To accommodate our education and to achieve financial security we delay commitment and childbirth to the edge of biological feasibility. Even when finally successful, after miscarriages and struggles to conceive (and increasingly, after IVF) we find that the exhaustions of raising young children hit us in middle age instead of in our prime. When I was a teenager, I would stay up all night for the hell of it. As a 35 year old, a few hours of missing sleep set me back for the next few days. When the time finally comes to raise children, we deal with the 1AM nursing and night terrors with the body we have left. In two generations of delayed childbearing the toll of time compounds, and leaves us as grandparents physically unable to provide the depth of support that a young family needs.

We pretend that children don't need to see their parents working to learn what the real world looks like. That age-segregated schools full of hyper-local and transient cultural pathologies are a sufficient role model. Our children enter the world having barely observed what the work of being an adult actually is, and then understandably struggle to reproduce it. Their entire lifetime of exposure to the economy and what it makes consists mainly of the media they consume, and so their conception of fulfilling careers is dominated by making video games and being in bands.

A slice of the work which was 40 years ago done by women and 100 years ago done also by men, is now no longer being done: creating a community by simply being in it all the time. This work has no measurable monetary value. It can't be hired out, or time slotted. It isn't even clear that it is possible to do it deliberately, rather than as an accidental result of accumulated contact. And so it goes undone.

We are failing to develop a culture that allows parenthood to exist alongside work in the way that parenthood actually is instead of the way that we wish it to be. And as a result, couples are largely opting out of the work of bearing and raising children.

Progress and Evolution

Culture is a technology that we develop through a process of evolution. And like biological evolution, its natural rate of change is extremely slow. Hominids learned how to make teardrop-shaped stone handaxes, and then made them identically for 1.5 million years. One person tries something, and if that person is successful, the people around them mimic them, and so knowledge spreads via peer groups and social proof at

the rate of personal testimony. Practices that take a lifetime to prove themselves flow one hop through the social graph per lifetime.

Constructing these was the essential skill of being human for an eternity.

This isn't fast enough. If our culture is going to keep up with technology, climate change and everything else, we need to make this process more deliberate. We need to build a culture of improving our culture.

Some would admonish us that all of this has been figured out before, generations before us, and any deviation from that received wisdom is doomed to fail. But this is just another form of denial, and an excuse to disengage. All of the patterns of life available to us within living memory were themselves half completed adaptations to the social upheaval of their time. We are too many generations past anything that resembles technological or cultural stability to have any clear referents. Even if you grant the tenuous assertion that the worlds some are nostalgic for ever actually existed, and that we remember their nature accurately or with any specificity at all, those worlds do not exist now.

We aren't going to go back to the era before low infant mortality, the mechanical loom, the dishwasher, and the washing machine made the work of maintaining a household less than an entire person's labor. Neither are we going to return to a world of yeoman farmers producing just above subsistence levels of food, and the necessary closeness and intimacy that resulted from the labor of the whole family tied to their land.

Those with the opposite inclination tend to make a different kind of error. We have enormously expanded human freedom over the last century, via technology, norms, and law, and there is a tendency to conflate any criticism of our culture with criticism of that freedom. Acknowledging that industrialization separated men from their children, or that women's liberation separated women from their children invites defensiveness about both. But we can't afford this type of distraction. Our two choices aren't between forward and back. We have an infinite number of choices, all forward.

Complementary to this is a belief that all problems are reducible to a lack of freedom, that whatever complaints we have about the world are evidence of an incomplete revolution, that the way is clear, we just have to sweep the forces of resistance out of the way and step into it. But freedom isn't enough. Attempting to bring up the next generation without any preconceptions about the world and their place in it is to bequeath them an empty toolbox, that they must jury-rig bits of their environment to fill, alone.

A culture devoted to the improvement of culture would have roles for many inclinations, both the iconoclasts and conservatives. We need experimenters to try bold new ways of living. We also need skeptics to remind us of the problems that remain unsolved, and that there are some immutable constraints of human nature even if we don't fully know

what they are. As much as either of those, we need historians, sociologists, anthropologists, to document all the other experiments that have been tried and the circumstances that necessitated them.

The past is a foreign country, each period both foreign to each other and to the present, and so the past or present of any culture in the world is no more privileged as a source of experiments than the past or present of our own. We shouldn't expect to succeed at anything on the first try, especially if we're starting from scratch, and so the history and present of cultures throughout the world is the richest available source of inspiration.

Westerners who wish to become vegetarian have very little to learn from their own ancestry about how to do it well. But they don't have to invent it from scratch. They can look to the vegetarian regions of India and imitate them. India has a thousand years of experience building a satisfying vegetarian diet that satisfies all of your nutritional needs. Similarly when we look to our own past for models of how parenting could be done, we should also look to other cultures in the present. India's joint families. China's use of grandparents as primary caretakers. Inuit anger management. Potentially richer still is the use of analogy. Moral panics about swing dancing, radio, rock and roll, dungeons and dragons, and video games have rightly given us an earned nonchalance about whatever new forms of media and entertainment arise.

I have no idea what world my children will inherit, and I believe every parent for the last hundred years has said the same. Climate change has already made the jet stream sinusoidal. The eastern US sees record snowfall every winter as the jet stream fails to contain arctic air, and France sees record heat waves as it sweeps saharan air over europe. By the time my kids have children of their own, the myth of Santa Claus will have become even more incoherent, because every kindergartener will learn that there's no ice at the north pole in the summertime. There is no new normal. For the rest of our lives, there is only a trajectory. The skill we must pass on to our children above all is how to adapt, and that starts by learning it ourselves.

So I'm going to be more experimental, and more generous towards other people's experiments. I'm going to pay more attention. And I'm going to look with the clearest eyes I can at the world as it is, instead of the world as it was or as I wish it to be.

And this fall, when the rains finally return to California, I'm going to find some way to celebrate, and if you feel inspired, I hope you'll celebrate too.