

“Personality and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture” by Warren Susman

(Source: <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst203/readings/susman2.html>)

A response by Joe Carlson

I just finished reading this essay. The wealth of insights located here is more than enough to recommend itself to anyone serious about understanding where we are culturally and why, by understanding where we have come from. In this essay, Susman describes the two modes of self-consciousness that defined the 19th and 20th centuries, and the shift in thinking that led from one to the other. To preface, both modes of understanding one's self, in both centuries are unbiblical and man-centered. Neither reflected the Trinity, and the Trinitarian way of interaction, that is, pure gift, and selflessness. Self-awareness and self-consciousness is not the ultimate goal in the Trinitarian Christian's life. Our only thought of self is who are we in Christ, and who are we in relation to neighbor. Christ and others form the web of our self-consciousness. Focus on self alone leads to idolatrous individualism and, ironically, self-destruction. But encouragement in that direction is not the purpose of Susman's essay. His, rather, is to expose the modern (and in doing so, the post-modern) view of self, and how it has developed over the past two hundred years, having sustained a fairly drastic transformation at the turn of the century. Chewing on Susman's insights and letting those flavors sink in is the goal of this little monologue.

In the past two centuries, there have been two dominant paradigms for viewing one's "self-expression." The 19th century saw one mode, and the 20th century seeing the second, the change coming fairly quickly as the 1900's began. What do I mean by "self-expression"? We all, consciously or not, have a need to know both who we are and who we are in relation to other people. This is our "self-consciousness", our "self-awareness", or as I am calling it, our "self-expression." I use this term because it implies both an inward and outward understanding of the self. Susman draws upon two hundred years of advice books, etiquette manuals, and self-help guides to understand prevalent winds of thinking. Reading these books in a chronological order, and noticing the changes that occur as time presses on, gave Susman a good idea as to what was valued, and what values were changing. This in turn gave insight into how people were changing, and what they considered important.

During the 1800's, the culture valued above all else "Character." This is the first mode of self-expression. Men and women were concerned with their internal state of being. Were they good people? Generous? Humble? How did they benefit others? How did their lives fit into the general scheme of the larger community? People were concerned therefore with Morality. Susman quotes Emerson, who said, "Moral order through the medium of individual nature." He explains,

In the age of self-consciousness, a popular vision of the self defined by the word "character" became fundamental in sustaining and even in shaping the significant forms of the culture. Such a concept filled two important functions. It proposed a method for both mastery and development of the self. In fact, it argued that its kind of self-control was the way to fullest development of the moral significance of self. But it also provided a method of presenting the self to society, offering a standard of conduct that assured interrelationship between the "social" and the "moral." The importance of character can be most easily established by examination of the hundreds of books, pamphlets, and articles produced during the century,

the character studies providing examples for emulation, and the manuals promising a way to character development and worldly success. These were clearly a popular and important cultural form, but further examination of other aspects of the culture--literature, the arts, popular music, and the like--helps reinforce the importance of the concept of character to the culture of the nineteenth century. It was a culture of character.

Not only did 'character' give people a sense of self-fulfillment, it also gave them a way to relate with others. Again, we have an innate need to know who we are, and who we are in relation to others. This gave them both. Natural man needs something to do, something to attain to, hence why it is in complete opposition to the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of salvation. The gospel informs us that we cannot do anything to improve our status before God. This violates our sensibilities and our inner need to achieve. Character, on the other hand, was attainable. This immediately gave rise to the "Protestant Ethic", or in less euphemistic terms, Moralism. Moralism was the engine that drove the church, and therefore the world, throughout the 19th century. It was the sworn enemy of the Church's faithful prophet, Dostoevsky, who successively showed it for what it really was. Moralism, taken to its logical end, is nothing more than high rebellion against the King, and leads to Napoleon-esque living. If I can attain anything, then I can attain heaven. If I can attain heaven, who needs a savior? If there is no savior, there is no need for a God. Hence, as Nietzsche honestly proclaimed, God is dead. And in a certain sense, He was. The church no longer needed Him, nor saw Him as relevant. This gave rise to the liberalism of the early 20th century, which promoted the idea that Christ is a fine example, whether or not He really lived, or really died. Now of course, Nietzsche was in a fundamental sense, wrong. God is not dead, and has been directing the course of these events, unveiling every day a new scene in His great drama of history. But from our perspective, Moralism reigned, and our 'character' became the most important aspect of our self-expression.

In this vein, we became a culture of producers. The industrial revolution exploded with productivity under the umbrella of this cultural mindset. Good moralists must always be doing something, achieving new heights, attaining a new level of performance. This frenetic energy began to change the face of culture. Up until this time, for centuries and millennia, people dwelt in interdependent communities. People needed one another for day-to-day operations. Hence towns were small, houses clustered together, and within walking distance of shops and businesses. The industrial revolution changed that. With the development of new technologies, people were able to live further and further away from one another. This coincided with an increasing understanding of the individual. Beginning with Descartes, the concept of the individual had grown and taken hold in the minds of men, teaching them they had individual rights, apart from any larger society. This included the Church. Men began to think of themselves as autonomous beings, which also coincided with decreasing need of a Savior King, hence the complete "death of God" by the end of the 19th century. All of this background led up to the 1800's, which led directly into the 20th century.

With the rise of technological achievements, such as the automobile and telephone, the individual became increasingly more important. Even in the 19th century, as it gained more footholds every moment, the focus was still somewhat on the larger community. How can my character be beneficial to the larger moral good? This was almost necessary as people still lived close to one another. But as communities increased spatially, rather than numerically, i.e. urban sprawl, the need to be concerned

with the well being of others began its road to the museum. Self began its road to the ultimate throne. It was at this point that the advice manuals began to change their tune slightly. Rather than character, the important mode of self-expression was one's personality. The goal was now not how you could be of benefit to others, but rather, how you could be appreciated by others. The focus went from outward, to inward. Now that Americans had achieved so much, and had reached such heights, at least in human terms, we became intensely interested and fixated on those achievements of ours. This will naturally bring the focus of our attentions back on us, and our needs. We needed the appreciation and acceptance of others. We needed others looking our direction. Susman explains,

The reader [of these new advice manuals] is urged repeatedly to "express your individuality" and to "eliminate the little personal whims, habit, traits that make people dislike you. Try in every way to have a ready command of the niceties, the manners, the ways of speech, etc. which make people think 'he's a mighty likable fellow.' that is the beginning of a reputation for personality." Thus "personality," like "character," is an effort to solve the problem of self in a changed social structure that imposes its own special demands on the self. Once again, such a popular view of self proposes a method of both self-mastery and self-development as well as a method of the presentation of that self in society. Both methods differed from those proposed in the culture of character and they underpin the development of a new culture, the culture of personality.

The irony is that we have no idea how to be ourselves. We need others to show us the way. Susman continues,

To be somebody one must be oneself (whatever that means). It is an almost too perfect irony that most of the works published and sold in large numbers as self-help in developing an effective personality insist that individuals should be "themselves" and not follow the advice or direction of others. The importance of being different, special, unusual, of standing out in a crowd – all of this is emphasized at the same time that specific directions are provided for achieving just those ends.

One of the main differences between character and personality was the method of development. Character needed to be strengthened. It was an internal quality or virtue that needed practice and opportunities to grow and mature. Personality on the other hand was an external perception that was developed. You create your personality, i.e. the way people see you. This perception is power. Susman explains,

"Personality is the quality of being Somebody." ... The problem is clear. We live now constantly in a crowd; how can we distinguish ourselves from others in that crowd? ... Since we live in such a world it is important to develop one's self--that is, those traits, "moral, intellectual, physical, and practical," that will enable us to think of ourselves and have others think of us as "somebodies." "To create a personality is power," one manual writer insists. One does this by being "conscious of yourself and of others," by being discerning and sincere, by showing energy, by paying attention to others so that they will pay attention to you.

Again the focus is not what you can do for others, but ultimately what they can do for you. What this did was create a culture of superficiality. Everything that was of importance was external. It didn't really matter if you were a wretch on the inside, as long as your public persona was where it needed to be (e.g. Bill Clinton). We therefore became obsessed with our image, leaving internal virtue and character to die in the desert. This was completely solidified in the rise of the silver screen. As screen personalities and later TV personalities developed, our admiration and 'love' for them increased as well. We became fixated on the larger than life celebrity. The image of exaggerated perfection became our sense of the ideal. The consequences of this idolatry need no explanation or illumination. One simply needs to stand at the check out stand of any local grocery store to realize its effects. As our devotion to these personalities increased, our focus on our own image also took on more and more importance. For now we had easily available models of perfection, readily seen, admired, lusted after, consumed, embraced, and rejected, for just a few pennies.

Here our consumer culture is seen in full force. The superficiality of our interaction led directly into epic materialism. Gnosticism inversed. The flesh and the spirit are separate entities, but the flesh is the only important one of the two. The flesh needs to be fed at the expense of the spirit. This is why we now have a nation of obesity, physically yes, but more importantly, materially. The drive for 'personality' has consumed us, and has reduced us to the celluloid we so much admire.

This has had a tremendous number of consequences. Our society, self-pleasing and self-satisfying, has grown so enamored with 'self' that true community and true culture is almost non-existent. If we define community as a specific collective of people associated and bound together by a shared commonality, it becomes a rarity. Likewise, if true culture is defined as a common set of shared beliefs, visions, and goals enfolded in tangible expressions such as art, music, or even commerce, then culture too might be given up for lost, or at least, seriously distorted. Even the church has become a very intersection of lives, vastly different ideals, paradigms, and directions by chance meeting together once a week, while the stoplight is red. Are we not supposed to be one body, pursuing a common goal, that being the glorification of God expressed in every aspect of our lives? The hang up is this. In a 'culture' of self, to live according to God's glory, self must die. Our own glory cannot be the focus. Here is why we are uncomfortable with this. We love our lives, the way we have it set up. Deep down we know that God is bigger than that, and has the power to rearrange everything, turning everything upside down, the money tables of our hearts, as it were. That frightens us, but not enough, not so much that we do anything about it. It needs to scare the Living Hell out of us, and I mean that quite literally.

As the body of Christ, we are the Civitas Dei. We are the new City of God. Being a new city, we are to develop a new culture, a culture of Christ. Fortunately, we do not need to (nor should we) start from scratch. We have two thousand years of Christians living on this earth to draw from. What culture are we steeped in? What culture makes up the fabric our daily lives? The culture of the world (which is really an anti-culture), or the culture of Christ? What worldview informs our every decision, a worldview centered on self, or on Christ?

We live in an antinomian, relativistic 'culture', where self and its desires are elevated as the two indisputable, and inalienable rights. If you question someone's 'right' to something based on their desire

for it, you better be prepared to go to court, and lose. Self and self's desires rule the land. Because of this, and the radical anti-Christian worldview this presents, we Christians need to be especially aware of how this has and is affecting our lives. In what areas has this worldview flanked our own and gone unnoticed in our decision-making faculties? How frequently does our own desires constitute the whole of our justification for any given act? Conversely, how frequently do we pause before engaging in whatever, and consciously ask ourselves, 1) How does this reflect my status as a child of Christ, and 2) How does this fulfill the command to love my neighbor as I love myself? Another way we might approach each choice of a thousand choices every day might be this. Before each choice ask, 1) Does this honor God as God, and 2) How does this reflect gratitude toward Him? If Christians began taking these questions seriously, I think our Christian culture would have the foundation it needed to produce the tangible expressions (art, music, commerce) that would be a "light unto the gentiles." It is then that the evangelism of the nations will be more than simply evangelizing them out of something, out of an evil culture, a self-centered culture. We would be evangelizing them into something, a God-fearing and a God-thanking culture, a culture *fundamentally different* than the culture we are born into, and taken out of. It is then that the Civitas Dei begins to take shape. It is then that the City of God strengthens its walls. We do not want simply a culture for Christ. That implies a culture made on its own terms, turning and directing itself toward Christ. No, we do not want a culture for Christ. We want a culture of Christ.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me.
Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.*

*Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger.
Christ in hearts of all who love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

*Christ to guide me, Christ to lead me, Christ in Song and Christ in Story.
Christ to wash me, Christ to feed me, Christ to bring me to His glory.*