

ANDY CROUCH



CULTURE MAKING

RECOVERING OUR CREATIVE CALLING



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INTRODUCTION



The essence of childhood is innocence. The essence of youth is awareness. The essence of adulthood is responsibility. This book is for people and a Christian community on the threshold of cultural responsibility.

For several decades now, many of American Christianity's most dynamic expressions have been youth ministries—even when they seem to serve grownups. Our goal, like that of many a plugged-in teenager, has been cultural awareness. We've paid the culture around us the ultimate compliment: careful study and, often, imitation. We have put in countless hours (often enjoyable ones!) “engaging culture”—looking, with surprising success, for hopeful signs of God in the world outside the church and also finding, with depressing frequency, signs of the enduring emptiness of that same world. Indeed, the desire to engage culture—to listen to it, learn from it and affirm it while also critiquing it—is one of the most hopeful developments of recent decades.

Our youth ministries have been astonishingly successful. Many of the most influential leaders of the evangelical movement began their careers with parachurch organizations like Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth Specialties, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and a host

of others. Some of our most prominent churches began literally as youth groups. In more recent years there has been a surge of events for college students and young adults that combine passionate faith with fluency in our media-saturated youth culture (along with media's large production budgets), as well as churches that seem to rip each month's sermon series directly from YouTube and BoxOfficeMojo.com. I am who I am because of culturally relevant ministries like these—and I spent fifteen years doing ministry in those contexts.

But what happens after youth ministry? What does it mean to be not just culturally aware but culturally responsible? Not just culture consumers or even just culture critics, but culture makers? Our newly regained cultural awareness means that we are not satisfied, as earlier generations might have been, with separating our faith from our “worldly” activities. We want our lives—our whole lives—to matter for the gospel. But what exactly does that mean?

This book is an attempt to point my fellow Christians toward new, and also very old, directions for understanding our calling in culture. I hope to offer us a new vocabulary, a new story and a new set of questions.

First, a new vocabulary, because our ways of talking about culture—how it works, how it changes, how it influences us and what we hope for from it—often do not serve us well. We talk about “the culture” even though culture is always cultures, plural: full of diversity, variety and history. We talk about culture as if it were primarily a set of ideas when it is primarily a set of tangible goods. We talk about “engaging,” “impacting” and “transforming the culture,” when in fact the people who most carefully study culture tend to stress instead how much we are transformed by it. If we are to be at all responsible agents in the midst of culture, we need to learn new ways of speaking about what we are doing.

Of course little of what I offer in this book is truly new. The first section borrows heavily from the field of sociology, which has developed an imposing apparatus for understanding this most characteristic and complex of human phenomena. (The literary critic Terry Eagleton observes, not reassuringly, that *culture* has been called the second most complicated word in the English language, after *nature*.) Most of the seminal writing in sociology, alas for us plainspoken Americans, bears the unmistakable

imprint of the German language in which its central insights were first formulated. In trying to translate from the language of specialists, I have trampled merrily through the carefully tended gardens of any number of scholars, and they will no doubt look on with horror at my attempts at simplification. In particular, the sociologists who are cited in the notes and thanked in the acknowledgments should be absolved of all responsibility for my ham-handedness—still, I hope that I have captured some of the essential ideas that Christians need to be more careful and creative in the world.

In the second section I'll be offering a new story or, more precisely, a new way of reading a very old story: the story of culture as told through the pages of Scripture, from its opening chapters to its surprise ending.

Until recently, Christians seem to have forgotten how to tell the story of Scripture as a story that is both a genuine disclosure of God's presence in the world and a deeply cultural artifact that intersects over and over with concrete historical realities. Liberal Christians, enamored with the historical-critical method, have done a fine job of dismantling the claims of Scripture in light of its cultural context, but evangelical Christians have often done a fine job of ignoring the cultural import of Scripture while defending its divine inspiration.

I am by no means the first writer in recent years to recapture a cultural way of reading the good news. We believe that rediscovering the cultural context of the gospel does nothing to prevent it from being good news from above, before and beyond us, and is actually the key to it being fully good news for us. I have benefited most of all from the many thinkers in the Reformed community who have followed the Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper's call to Christian cultural responsibility. I have tried to credit a representative sampling of them in the notes, but my simplifications will be all too apparent to those who have made more pilgrimages to Geneva and Grand Rapids than I.

Finally, I want to offer a new set of questions about our calling. What is it, exactly, that we are called to do in the world? Are we called to "transform culture" or to "change the world"? If we are to be culture makers, where in the world do we begin? How do we deal with power, that most difficult of all cultural realities, and its inescapably uneven distribution?

Readers who are looking for seven easy steps to cultural influence will have to look elsewhere—because I do not happen to believe that anything lasting is easy. What we most have to learn about being creators of culture is the very thing we human beings find hardest to learn: everything about our calling, from start to finish, is a gift. What is most needed in our time are Christians who are deeply serious about cultivating and creating but who wear that seriousness lightly—who are not desperately trying to change the world but who also wake up every morning eager to create.

The worst thing we could do is follow that familiar advice to “pray as if it all depended on God, and work as if it all depended on you.” Rather, we need to become people who work as if it all depends on God—because it does, and because that is the best possible news. We work for, indeed work in the life and power of, a gracious and infinitely resourceful Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. And we need to know ourselves well enough that the thought that it might in fact all depend on us would drive us straight to fasting and trembling prayer. I’m grateful that in the creation of the small cultural good that is this book, I’ve tasted both that kind of work and that kind of prayer.



I hope that most people who read this book will read it together with someone else. One of the most mysterious and beautiful things about culture is that it has to be shared. I can walk out alone into the wilderness, and from time to time I should. But I am never alone in culture. I am always accompanied by those who created it before me and share it with me; I can never really escape my responsibility to those who come after me, whose horizons of possibility I will move in some way, for better or worse.

I hope friends will read this book and begin to envision their friendships not just as the companionship of compatible individuals but as potentially transformative partnerships in the places where they live, study, work and play.

I hope families will read this book and discover that the family, so seemingly insignificant in an age of technology and celebrity, is still the heart of culture, the primary place where most of us are called to cultivate and create.

I hope churches will read this book and take the risky path of celebrating their members who do not go into “full-time Christian service” but who serve Christ full time in their own arena of culture.

I hope that those with evident cultural power will read this book and discover God’s purpose for their power; I hope that those who feel small and neglected in the world will discover that God has something great for them to do, that they are not forgotten but are at the very center of his plan, the heroes of his surprise ending.

It could seem like a book about culture is likely somehow to be a book about us—about what we do, what we accomplish, our ambitions and dreams and schemes.

I hope that when you finish this book, you will have discovered that culture is not finally about us, but about God.

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THE HORIZONS OF THE POSSIBLE



This book addresses a huge topic, so let's begin by making it clear just how huge the topic is.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of what “cultured” people do—hushed art museums and symphony orchestras—although art and music, as well as museums and orchestras, as well as the very idea that some people are “cultured” and others are not, are all part of a particular culture.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of the trends, fads and fashions of the self-proclaimed culture mavens who focus our collective attention on the latest single-named celebrity or the latest piece of technology—though celebrity, technology and mavens are all part of a particular culture, the mass-mediated culture in which we participate every day.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of ethnic identity, the collection of practices, beliefs and stories that carve out a sense of distinctiveness and pride or failure and shame, or perhaps some of both, in a world where cultural pluralism is widely affirmed and yet the hard realities of history render some cultures more equal than others. Before we finish

we will indeed have to consider our particular cultures, not just culture in general. But not yet.

We are not even just talking about culture in the sense of the governing ideas, values and presuppositions of our society—as it is used in phrases like “culture wars,” “the culture of disbelief” or “the decline of our culture”—although ideas, values and presuppositions are indeed at the heart of every human cultural effort, and the fact that we find them there gives us some clues about culture’s ultimate significance. Nor are we just talking about the ongoing contest in democratic societies to advance one set of ideas, values and presuppositions in the realm of politics and legislation—though laws are among the most dramatic ways that culture is expressed and enforced.

Many attempts, especially Christian attempts, to come to terms with culture have fallen short because they paid too much attention to one of these categories of culture. High culture, pop culture, ethnic culture, political culture—all are part of culture and worthy of attention, reflection and action.

But culture is more than any of these things. And to grasp how much more it is, we need to go deeper down and further back, to the beginning. Actually, we need to go back to three beginnings.

BIRTH

Begin with your own beginning.

You emerged wrinkled and wet, squinting against the light. You wailed in a thin and raspy voice, taking in gulps of unfamiliar air, until someone placed you near a heartbeat you knew even better than your own. Close to your mother’s warmth, you became calm and alert. You opened your eyes, feeling the air on your skin, hearing sounds and voices that once had echoed through your watery cradle, now vivid and distinct. Perhaps your eyes even found a face, somehow recognizing the significance of eyes, nose and mouth, and fixed on it with rapt attention.

A human baby is the strangest and most wonderful creature this world can offer. No other mammal emerges so helpless from the womb, utterly unable to cope with the opportunity and adversity of nature. Yet no other creature holds such limitless possibility. While arguments about nature

and nurture have raged for centuries and will do so for centuries more, everyone agrees that human beings come into the world primed for culture.

Without culture—which begins, for the baby, with recognition of relationship, finding its mother and its father, and goes on in the first few years to what is in some ways the most stupendous of human achievements, the acquisition of language—we simply do not become anything at all. We are hard-wired for nothing but learning. All we begin with are possibilities.

HISTORY

Begin at history's beginning.

We hold lanterns up to cave walls and see that our earliest ancestors were artists. They traced patterns in the clay with their fingers. They sculpted figures, from bison to the female human form, into the rocks, seemingly prompted by the natural shape of the surface. They mixed pigments with mortar and pestle and created dramatically large paintings—a painting of a bison in the cave at Altamira, Spain, is over six feet wide. This highly developed artistic activity was well underway 14,000 years ago. So complex is the work that we find in the caves of Europe, says the writer Paul Johnson, that “it is likely that art was the first of the human professions.”

But we find more than art in humankind's early history. We find tools, like the arrowheads that I collected as a boy on my grandparents' Georgia farm. We find charred circles where our forebears harnessed fire. We find domesticated animals—the skulls of two dogs found in central Russia in 2003 are roughly contemporary with the cave art of Europe. We find toys. And we find tombs.

Those earliest traces of culture do not preserve language. But soon we have records not just of language but of stories. The most durable stories—the ones we call “myths”—wrestle directly with the questions provoked by the existence of the world. Like astronomers who can peer into the history of the universe with powerful telescopes, when we listen to the ancient myths we are encountering the human consciousness just beginning to awaken, and as it awakens it asks: Why are we here? Where did this world come from? Who or what is responsible for the bison so carefully and lovingly portrayed on the cave wall?

Take the *Enuma Elish*, one of those texts from the dawn of human storytelling preserved for us in tantalizingly fragile form on clay tablets from Ashurbanipal's great library at Nineveh. To the people who told and heard this epic, it must have seemed obvious that the world needed a story. The story they told, which archaeologists believe goes back at least to the third millennium before Christ, was the victory of the god Marduk over the serpent Tiamat and her company of monsters. Having vanquished Tiamat, Marduk fillets her, turning one fillet into the heavens and the other into the earth. In one version of the myth, he turns her brood of monsters into the Zodiac, the twelve constellations through which the sun passes in the course of a year.

This is what human beings do: we extract stories even from the stars.

SCRIPTURE

All human beings share the first two beginnings—the universal experience of infancy, and the history of the species. But biblical people emphasize a different beginning, the story recounted in the first pages of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis begins with a Creator, purposeful and pleased with his work. Already in the first sentence, the writer of Genesis stakes out a story very different from the creation myths that were circulating at the time. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” There is no violent conflict among gods and monsters here, no irrepressible and threatening chaos, just the hushed sound of divine breath in the dark. Then comes the stately and measured progression toward the sixth day, the pinnacle of creation:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

You can fill many bookshelves with the three thousand years of conversation sparked by Genesis 1:27. The claim—repeated, poetically and emphatically, twice in one verse—that human beings are made in God's image takes on all the more resonance when we realize that the same people

who wrote and preserved Genesis 1:27 also knew the second commandment, which insisted, “you shall not make a graven image.” The writers of the Bible would have been the first to insist that human attempts at fashioning images of God are doomed to failure or worse. But God, it seems, has no such limitation. God himself makes an “image” of himself. Humankind’s “images of God” are always deficient and destructive, the Hebrew Bible insists, but God’s own “image of God” is the summary of everything he has made, crowned with the words, “It was very good.”

What does it mean that we are made in the image of God? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to ask another: What “image of God” is conveyed by Genesis 1:1-26? The God we meet in these verses, so unlike the alternative gods on offer in the ancient Near East, is first of all a source of limitless, extraordinary *creativity*. For the writers of the *Enuma Elish*, the world was a byproduct of divine conflict. The cosmos of the *Enuma Elish* is grim, with chaos always near. Even human beings, who are Marduk’s crowning achievement, are a response to a divine political problem (as near as we can tell from the fragmentary text): the other gods complain that there is no one to worship them, and Marduk’s “cunning plan” is to create human beings to serve that purpose. In contrast, the writer of Genesis looks at the world, from stars to starfish, and sees a purposeful, engaged, creative intelligence at work. Every “kind” of animal is further testimony to the extraordinary fruitfulness of this Creator’s imagination. The world is not the product of accident or heavenly politics, but of a free, even relaxed, blessed Creator.

However, this Creator also addresses the fundamental concern that lies underneath the *Enuma Elish* and other creation myths—the human sense that chaos is never far away. Genesis 1 is a sequence of acts of *ordering*, as the Creator gradually carves out a habitable environment. The first chapter of Genesis records a series of divisions—order from chaos, light from darkness, heaven from earth, sea from land—each of which makes the world more amenable for the flourishing of creativity.

Another way of putting these two features of creation is to say that Genesis presents God as both Creator and Ruler of the universe. Creators are those who make something new; rulers are those who maintain order and separation.

As an American I’m aware that I tend to celebrate creators and am

suspicious of rulers—our nation’s history began, after all, with the overthrow of a ruler and the creation of a novel form of government. In America, though not at many other times and places in history, innovation is prized more than conservation. The idea that the world’s Creator is also its Ruler—that order accompanies creativity—may strike us as suspicious and unfamiliar.

Yet creativity cannot exist without order—a structure within which creation can happen. On a cosmic level the extraordinary profusion of species could never survive if the world were an undifferentiated soup of elements. This is true of human creativity too. Without the darkened box of a theater, films would lose their compelling power. Without the lines and spaces that make up written English, this book would be a soup of letters. Creativity requires cosmos—it requires an ordered environment.

So in a way the Creator’s greatest gift to his creation is the gift of structure—not a structure which locks the world, let alone the Creator himself, into eternal mechanical repetition, but a structure which provides freedom. And those who are made in his image will also be both creators and rulers. They will have a unique capacity to create—perhaps not to call something out of nothing in quite the way that God does in Genesis 1:1, but to reshape what exists into something genuinely new. And they will have a responsibility to care for what God has made—“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). They will sort out the cultivated from the wild. Human beings will be gardeners.

MAKING SOMETHING OF THE WORLD

This, then, is the picture of humanity we find in Genesis: creative cultivators. We’ll return to the Genesis story in chapter six. But for the moment notice how much it has in common with our other beginnings—the beginnings we have in common with every human being. The man and the woman in the Garden, just like every newborn baby and just like human beings at the dawn of their history—indeed, just like the human beings in the myths that the Genesis story was clearly written to rebut—find themselves already in the midst of a world. We can’t escape the fact that the world came before us.

They also find themselves, as we find ourselves, as human beings always and everywhere have found themselves, sensing that they are in the midst of a story. For the baby, it is the story of her family, a story that will be put together using words like *mama* and *daddy*. For our earliest ancestors, according to the archaeological record, it is the mysterious story of a world with stars and rocks and bison, a world that cries out for explanation.

And God gives the primordial man and woman the same task that the baby almost immediately undertakes with the raw materials of her vocal cords, lungs and mouth—the same thing that our human ancestors did with stone and fire and pigment on cave walls. They go to work with these recalcitrant raw materials (even the Garden before the Fall, it seems, required tilling and keeping), forming and reshaping the world they find themselves in. They begin “making something of the world.”

This phrase, which I have adapted from the Christian cultural critic Ken Myers, distills what culture is and why it matters: *Culture is what we make of the world*. Culture is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it’s given to us and make something else. This is the original insight of the writer of Genesis when he says that human beings were made in God’s image: just like the original Creator, we are creators. God, of course, began with nothing, whereas we begin with something. But the difference is not as great as you might think. For every act of creation involves bringing something into being that was not there before—every creation is *ex nihilo*, from nothing, even when it takes the world as its starting point. Something is added in every act of making. This is clearest in the realm of art, where the raw materials of pigment and canvas become more than you ever could have predicted. Even a five-year-old’s finger painting is more than the sum of paper and paint. But creation, the marvelous making of more than was there before, also happens when a chef makes an omelet, when a carpenter makes a chair, when a toddler makes a snow angel.

Culture is all of these things: paintings (whether finger paintings or the Sistine Chapel), omelets, chairs, snow angels. It is what human beings make of the world. It always bears the stamp of our creativity, our God-given desire to make something more than we were given.

But culture is not just what we make of the world in the first, most obvious sense. Culture also is what we make of the world in a deeper sense of that phrase. When we find ourselves perplexed by a scene in a movie or the lyrics of a song, we say to our friends, “What do you make of that?” We aren’t usually asking our friends to write a new scene or sing new lyrics—we aren’t asking for more creation. We mean, what sense do you make of it? We are asking for interpretation.

Indeed, the world that every baby, every human society and our primordial parents found themselves in clearly needs some interpreting. One of the most striking things about the world is just how little it discloses to us about its true meaning. It is full of mystery—at its best, full of wonder; at its worst, full of terror. Making sense of the wonder and terror of the world is the original human preoccupation. And it is this deeper sense of culture that most clearly distinguishes us from all the rest of creation. Ants and birds and chimpanzees make something of the world, in the sense of reshaping their environment with anthills and nests and even rudimentary tools and techniques—but we simply have no indication that any other creature wonders about the mystery of the world. Making sense of the world, interpreting its wonder and its terror, is left up to human beings alone.

So how do we make sense of the world? The two senses turn out to be more intertwined than we might have thought. We *make sense* of the world by *making something* of the world. The human quest for meaning is played out in human making: the finger-painting, omelet-stirring, chair-crafting, snow-swishing activities of culture. Meaning and making go together—culture, you could say, is the activity of making meaning.

Think about the baby again. As she tries out the infinite combinations of sounds that her tongue and throat and lungs can produce, she happens upon a few that elicit an excited response from her parents. Quite by accident, her tongue bumps against her upper teeth while she vocalizes, making the sound “da.” She does it again, over and over. Her father wanders into the room. “Da. Da. Da-da.” Suddenly her daddy is leaning close, smiling, exclaiming, picking her up, hugging her. “She said *daddy!*” The baby might not have meant any such thing, but this smiling, hugging, loving man is clearly pleased. The next day, when she’s trying

out vocalizations again, it happens once more. Over the coming weeks the baby begins to connect that sound—"da-da"—with the hugs and the smiles. Perhaps she hears other people making the same sounds and is inspired to make them some more. Over time "da-da" becomes more than just a random and intriguing combination of sounds. The baby has made sense of daddy—given a name to an exceedingly important feature of her world—by making something of the world. Meaning and making have come together.

THE WORLD OF CULTURE

But notice something else about the baby: the world that she must make something of is not just the natural, created world of sound, teeth, lungs and air. Nor is it even just the other creatures, mommy and daddy, that inhabit that world with her. The father's excitement at hearing "da-da" comes because in our language (and in most other languages, as it happens) that sequence of sounds resembles a word. The existence of that word is itself a part of the world that the baby is trying to make something of. But the word is not "natural"—it is cultural. Culture, not just creation, is part of the baby's world.

One of the key insights that emerged over several centuries' worth of study in the fields we now call sociology and anthropology was summed up by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger later expanded on its religious implications in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, which begins, "Every human society is an enterprise of world-building." Culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact *part of the world* that every new human being has to make something of.

So the baby must make something not just of sounds but of words. Words and language are as inescapable a part of "the world" with which she must work as are lungs and tongues. Omelets and chairs and paintings are just as much a part of the world as eggs and wood and pigments, preexisting and waiting for both interpretation and further creation. The world the baby arrives in encompasses not just the original stuff of pre-human creation but all the myriad things that humans themselves have

already made from that stuff. The world with which the baby will have to come to terms as she grows is just as much cultural as it is natural.

So culture is cumulative: our cultural products become part of the world that a future generation must make something of—in both senses. It's important to appreciate how deep this goes, which is why Berger and Luckmann gave their book the startling title *The Social Construction of Reality*. It is not that nature is somehow deeply real and culture is shadowy, vague or transient. Culture really is part of our world, just as central to our lives and our being human as nature. In some ways it is more central. A baby who is born without hearing may never experience sound or understand the significance of the sounds that he produces by chance with his own vocal tract. But he can survive and even thrive in the world if he is taught language—whether a sign language or a written language—and thus inducted into a culture. The cultural world of language is more essential to human flourishing than the natural world of sound.

THE RIVER AND THE HIGHWAY

Culture has quite literally reshaped the world. In the nineteenth century, if you had asked well-traveled Americans to sketch a map of their country, including its most significant features, they would almost certainly have drawn you a continent full of rivers. The Mississippi, of course, but also the Connecticut, the Ohio, the Missouri, the St. Lawrence and a dozen more. Rivers—part of the created, “uncultured” world—were a crucial part of the world that early Americans had to make something of. And make something of them they did indeed—the rivers, in their dual role as transportation routes for cargo and people on the one hand, and barriers to travel on the other, prompted myriad cultural innovations. Just to name the rivers is to realize that they gave their names to many of the states created as America expanded westward. Cities arose at the juncture of rivers. Technologies were developed to harness the river for transportation. Songs and stories arose that depended on rivers for their setting and meaning—try to imagine *Huckleberry Finn* without Huck and Jim on the barge floating down the Mississippi.

But if you asked similarly well-traveled Americans in the twenty-first century to sketch a map of the continent, I suspect they would have a hard

time identifying any river but the Mississippi. Here's a quick quiz: where on a map is the Missouri River? If you know the answer, you probably either live in St. Louis or have a lifelong obsession with geography. Rivers, so central to the world of the nineteenth century, are now peripheral at best. Interstate highways, on the other hand, are the principal means of travel by land, and most Americans can sketch out the rough lines of Interstate 90, cutting east to west across the continent from Boston to Seattle, and the highway Southern Californians call "the 5," stretching from San Diego to the Pacific Northwest.

Highways are our rivers. Cities arise and economies thrive where they intersect. New forms of commerce flourish alongside the interstate. The extraordinarily complex web of modern intermodal transport, depending on containers that can be transferred seamlessly from ship to rail to truck, depends on the highway system. Songs and stories arise from the highway system too—if nothing quite so romantic and durable as *Huckleberry Finn*, then at least the enduring tradition of the American "road movie" and Jack Kerouac's Beat classic *On the Road*.

The transition from river to highway is a transition from one world to another. We can argue about whether interstate highways make the world better or worse, but we cannot deny that they make a new kind of world. They do so partly by reshaping the physical world itself, blasting through hills and bridging rivers so smoothly that we don't even know the names of the rivers we cross. And they do so more profoundly by reshaping our imagination, our mental picture of what is in the world and what matters in it. The difference they make, however, is not "imaginary"—it is real. It really is possible to drive from Boston to Seattle in fifty hours or less (if you have a partner to drive when you get sleepy). And you can do so without knowing the name of a single river or port. It's possible because of Interstate 90, a purely cultural product, along with the myriad other cultural products that interact with and support it. Culture, not just nature, has become the world that we must make something of.

THE HORIZONS OF THE POSSIBLE

Up to now I've indulged in a risky shortcut: talking about culture in the abstract, almost as if it were an ethereal Big Idea, written with Capital

Letters, floating through History. Yet no one—not even those who read books with titles like *Culture Making*—makes Culture. Rather, Culture, in the abstract, always and only comes from particular human acts of cultivation and creativity. We don't make Culture, we make omelets. We tell stories. We build hospitals. We pass laws. These specific products of cultivating and creating—borrowing a word from archaeology and anthropology, we can call them “artifacts,” or borrowing from philosophy, we can call them “goods”—are what eventually, over time, become part of the framework of the world for future generations.

Likewise, the word *culture*, when it is reserved for art, music, literature and the like, tends to make us think of vague interior states. We think of a beautiful symphony or a provocative work of art in a museum—powerful ideas and images, perhaps, but not artifacts that seem to do anything real, anything tangible, to the world outside the walls where we enjoy or endure them. Yet culture, in its more fundamental sense, really does remake the world, because culture shapes the horizons of the possible.

Think again of that fifty-hour journey from Boston to Seattle. Before the vast, culture-making act that was the construction of Interstate 90, such a journey, in terms of speed and comfort, was impossible. Now it is possible. What made the difference was a concrete cultural good—in this case, quite literally made of concrete. Of course, most of us are too impatient to drive across the country, so if we can afford it, we avail ourselves of an even more audacious kind of culture—air travel—and cover the distance in a few hours. What was previously impossible, culture has made possible.

And even more remarkably, culture can make some things impossible that were previously possible. Reading David McCullough's biography of John Adams a few years ago, I was reminded that not that long ago, a vast cultural infrastructure made it possible to travel the three hundred miles from Boston to Philadelphia by horse. There were roads, wayside inns, stables and turnpikes along which travelers could make a slow but steady journey from one city to the other. For more than a century these cultural goods made interstate horse travel possible. But I dare say it would be impossible now. The inns and stables of the nineteenth century are long gone. Horses are forbidden from the shoulders of the highways that con-

nect Boston and Philadelphia, even if horses could stand the roar of the traffic that would be rushing by them just a few feet away. To ride a horse any distance in what is now called “the Northeast Corridor” would be a feat of bravery, to say the least, and quite possibly also an act of cruelty to animals. Culture has made travel by horse, once eminently possible, impossible.

And these two functions—making things possible that were impossible, and perhaps even more importantly making things impossible that were once possible—when put together add up to “world-building.” *World*, after all, is a shorthand way of describing all those forces outside ourselves, beyond our control and will, that both constrain us and give us options and opportunities. After many thousands of years of accumulating human culture, the world which we must make something of—the environment in which we carry on the never-ending human cultural project—is largely the world others before us have made. Culture, even more than nature, defines for us the horizons of possibility and impossibility. We live in the world that culture has made.

DIAGNOSING CULTURE

If we want to understand culture, then, it’s always best to begin and end with specific cultural goods. I’ve found five questions to be particularly helpful in understanding how a particular artifact fits into its broader cultural story.

The first two questions arise from culture’s meaning-making function—culture’s role in making sense of the world. (1) *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world is?* What are the key features of the world that this cultural artifact tries to deal with, respond to, make sense of? (2) *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world should be?* What vision of the future animated its creators? What new sense does it seek to add to a world that often seems chaotic and senseless?

Then come two questions that acknowledge culture’s extraordinary power to shape the horizons of possibility. (3) *What does this cultural artifact make possible?* What can people do or imagine, thanks to this artifact, that they could not before? Conversely, (4) *what does this cultural artifact make impossible (or at least very difficult)?* What activities and experiences

that were previously part of the human experience become all but impossible in the wake of this new thing? Often this is the most interesting question of all, especially because so much technological culture is presented exclusively in terms of what it will make *possible*. Yet few cultural artifacts serve only to move the horizons of possibility outward and leave the horizons of impossibility unchanged. Almost every cultural artifact, in small or large ways, makes something impossible—or at least more difficult—that was possible before.

Finally, because culture inevitably begets more culture, we have to look at the effect of this artifact on future culture. (5) *What new forms of culture are created in response to this artifact?* What is cultivated and created that could not have been before?

To be sure, these five questions may yield more interesting answers with some cultural artifacts than others. *What do omelets assume about the world?* may not seem to be the kind of question you'd want to spend much time on. Then again, even to answer that question is to remind ourselves just how much culture is part of the "world" we must make something of—since omelets assume that the world includes not just the natural phenomena called eggs (obtained from chickens that have been domesticated through millennia in order to produce reliably large, tasty eggs for human consumption) but cultural phenomena, including a ready source of high heat, nonstick or well-seasoned frying pans, natural ingredients like peppers or mushrooms and processed ingredients like cheese or ham, a meal called breakfast where eggs figure prominently, utensils that are well suited to eating a large mass of eggs, and hearty appetites that are inclined to consume several eggs in a sitting. Just for starters.

What do omelets assume about the way the world should be? Well, I suppose they assume that the tasty, protein-laden nutrients of an egg are better eaten cooked than raw—and perhaps also that the world should have an alternative to the blandness of plain cooked eggs. The world should be multicolored, with green peppers and pink ham and white cheese contrasting pleasingly with the pale yellow eggs; the world should have many textures, both crunchy and smooth. The world should hold together—a haphazard pile of scrambled eggs is antithetical to the vision of the well-turned-out omelet, semicircular and perfectly bronzed. The world should

be filling, satisfying, rich in the mouth, large on the plate—an overflow of plenitude from the small, unremarkable beginning of an egg (or three). Life, or at least breakfast, should leave us stuffed.

Perhaps there is more here than we realized. Even a simple breakfast dish encodes a whole set of assumptions and hopes about the world, which we could summarize this way: the world has eggs, but it should have omelets too. The world, the cultural artifact of the omelet says, always has room for more. The givens of our natural environment, as satisfying and nutritious as they are, are nothing compared to what can happen with a little culture—or, in the case of the omelet, centuries and centuries of gradual perfecting of all the cultural ingredients, from cheese to frying pans, that make the omelet possible. Culture fulfills the latent promise of nature. To echo biblical language, the egg is good, but the omelet is very good—but now we're really getting ahead of ourselves.

What does the omelet make possible? To balance out our meditations on the glories of omelets, perhaps we should engage in a bit of culinary realpolitik. The omelet, fully cooked as it is, helps make it possible for salmonella to contaminate our egg supply without causing a public health disaster. For that matter, the omelet, generally a good source of cholesterol, saturated fat and sodium, might make heart disease possible, or a lot more likely, for many of its satisfied customers. It also may contribute to the fortunes of the egg industry and the wallets of egg industrialists. *What does the omelet make impossible, or at least a lot more difficult?* Perhaps the omelet doesn't make anything truly impossible, though you may be able to think of something I haven't. It certainly makes eating raw eggs—not unknown in human history—a lot less appealing. It may even make plain old scrambled eggs seem rather second rate. It makes it harder to sit down to a “continental” breakfast of bread, butter and jam, and feel fully satisfied. It makes it harder to pay for breakfast at a restaurant, in many American cities at any rate, without getting into double digits. It may make it harder for many of us to stay thin.

What new culture is created in response to the omelet? New kinds of omelets—omelets with egg whites only (a response to the original omelet's deficiencies for cholesterol watchers) and omelets with new combinations of ingredients. New kinds of kitchen implements—better surfaces for ex-

cuting the all-important omelet flip, pan sizes suited to creating the perfect omelet half-moon shape. The “omelet station” in fancy hotel restaurants, staffed by a chef whose only job is to make omelets to order. Books about omelet preparation. Websites (or at least sections of egg websites) about omelets. And these very paragraphs in this book, themselves a small cultural artifact seeking to “make something of” omelets and the world they make.

THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

As fascinating, and revealing, as these questions may be when applied to omelets, they are even more helpful when we try to understand large-scale cultural goods like the interstate highway system, established when President Dwight Eisenhower signed into law the “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act” on June 29, 1956. Encoded into its very beginnings was America’s preoccupation with being prepared to meet the military threat from the Soviet Union. Eisenhower had been impressed by Germany’s autobahn system while serving there in the United States Army—so that the interstate highway system’s origins, like so many other cultural artifacts in post-World War II America, were shaped by the experiences and values of military men, many of which can be discerned in our answers to our diagnostic questions.

What does the interstate highway assume about the way the world is? Of course it assumes the existence of the automobile, which in turn assumes combustion engines and combustible fuel—so that the interstate highway system depends on other exceedingly complex cultural artifacts for its existence. It assumes the political unification of relatively distant places, the modern nation-state that stretches from “sea to shining sea,” so different from the arrangements of an earlier time when each valley could be a kingdom. It assumes millennia of accumulated experience in road building, reaching back at least to the Romans’ engineering achievements that made possible their own far-flung empire. The highway system also assumes a preexisting map of significant cities, most of which will be incorporated into its grid (thus reinforcing the viability of the cities it passes through, while sidelining those it passes by). It assumes significant national wealth that provides the capacity to invest in such a massive project,

and it assumes the population pressures and economic growth that have produced that wealth.

What does it assume about the way the world should be? The world should be smoother and faster, and the world should be safer—its corners, hills and valleys literally rounded off in the interests of efficiency. Rivers and mountains should be scenery, not obstacles. The perceived distance from one place to the next should shrink—the mile should seem like a short distance rather than a long one. Consistency from place to place is more valuable than the particulars of each place—uniform signage and road markings, fixed radii for curves and angles for exit ramps, and identical rules of the road should make local knowledge unnecessary. We should be able to go anywhere and feel more or less at home. Goods from far away should become more economically competitive with goods from nearby; goods nearby should have new markets in places far away.

What does the interstate highway system make possible? If you are reading this in the United States, it is overwhelmingly likely that everything you can touch nearby—your clothes, the chair, the coffee you're sipping or the food you're eating—traveled at some point by interstate, more cheaply and more quickly than it would have otherwise. So the interstates have indeed made smooth and efficient commerce more possible. The interstates also spawned entirely new forms of commerce—from fast-food restaurants to Cracker Barrel, that paradoxical restaurant chain that reveres “old country cooking” and inhabits apparently time-weathered old buildings, but is in fact only available next to interstate highways. They helped make America's car culture not only possible but, in most parts of the country, necessary. We wouldn't have green-lawned suburbs without the interstates that made it possible to live far from workplaces in central cities. And without the interstates we wouldn't have the abandoned-lot “inner cities,” created when middle-class families moved to the suburbs. In fact, when the Fannie Mae Foundation asked urban planners to name the top ten factors in the way American cities developed (and decayed) in the twentieth century, the interstate highway system was number one.

So the interstate highway system has also made some things impossible, or at least much more difficult. It has become more difficult for many Americans to work without commuting. It has become impossible to sus-

tain economic growth without reasonably priced oil—an impossibility that becomes more ominous the more oil we use. In many small towns that were bypassed by the interstates, vibrant commercial life has become impossible; even as in cities that were at the intersection of major interstates (like Atlanta), vibrant commercial growth has become more possible, and new forms of culture have arisen at otherwise forsaken highway exits.

And yet the story of interstate highway culture, and the broader automotive culture it enables, is not over. *What new culture is being created in response?* A Toyota Prius hatchback owned by the nonprofit organization PhillyCarShare has a permanent parking space a few blocks from my home. PhillyCarShare's executive director, Tanya Seaman, was working as a city planner when she and a few friends conceived the vision of hundreds of cars parked in convenient locations around the city, freeing many residents of both central and suburban Philadelphia from the need to own their own cars. The organization, which was operating in the black with a \$10 million budget in 2007, has grown to thirty thousand members and over four hundred cars. City planners estimate that each shared car makes it possible for up to twenty-five people to forego buying a private car of their own—so there are perhaps ten thousand fewer vehicles crammed onto Philadelphia's streets and highways in 2007 than when the organization was founded in 2002. PhillyCarShare would never have been necessary before the interstate highway system changed the horizons of metropolitan Philadelphia—but its creative and sustainable solution to urban driving would never have been possible either.

CULTURE IS NOT OPTIONAL

So this is what culture does: it defines the horizons of the possible and the impossible in very concrete, tangible ways. I don't just believe in fast and convenient travel by highway; I don't just value it; it isn't just something I can imagine that I couldn't imagine before. It is something I can actually do. And the only reason I can do it is because someone (President Eisenhower, the members of the United States Congress and untold numbers of civil engineers, road builders and zoning commission members and accountants) created something that wasn't there before.

And, for that matter, I might believe that we'd be better off if we didn't

spend eighty-one minutes a day in our cars (the American average, according to the *Wall Street Journal*), that the days of horse travel were actually better for people and animals, and that the rapid consumption of our planet's limited supply of fossil fuels is both greedy and foolish. But it's impossible for me to live as if the highways don't exist. And, again, those impossibilities are there, whether I like it or not, because someone created something that wasn't there before. Surely interstate highways have removed many appealing possibilities from American life, from viable Main Streets to travel by horse (though both may be more appealing from a safe historical distance than they were up close).

But however constricting culture's horizons of impossibility may seem, culture is indispensable for any human possibility. Culture is the realm of human freedom—its constraints and impossibilities are the boundaries within which we can create and innovate. This is clearly true of a cultural artifact like this book: when I write about omelets for a North American audience, I can expect that nearly every reader will know what an omelet is, and most will have eaten one. I can be all but certain that anyone who purchases this book will have driven on an interstate highway. (This book itself, the physical object, almost certainly traveled on an interstate highway on its way to you, and as an author I rely on that too.) But even if my book finds its way to an omelet-innocent, interstate-free corner of the world, I can be absolutely sure that we share the cultural heritage of spoken and written language. Because of language, interstates and even omelets, we are able to engage in a conversation that would be impossible otherwise. To whatever extent you have been engaged by, enlightened by or even confused by the content of this chapter, culture has made that possible. Indeed, without culture, literally nothing would be possible for human beings. To say that culture creates the horizons of possibility is to speak literal, not just figurative or metaphorical, truth.

This truth is embedded in the Genesis story of beginnings. Not only does God himself function as both Creator and Ruler, breather of possibilities and setter of limits, he intends the same for those who are made in his image. Without the task of gardening—cultivating, tending, ruling and creating using the bountiful raw material of nature—the woman and man would have had nothing to do, nothing to be. Whatever distortions

may arise as the man and the woman carry out their cultural task (and as we know from experience and will see in part two, the distortions are grave indeed), culture begins, just as human beings begin, in the realm of created blessing. The beginning of culture and the beginning of humanity are one and the same because culture is what we were made to do.

There is no withdrawing from culture. Culture is inescapable. And that's a good thing.

CULTURAL WORLDS



Culture is what human beings make of the world, but not everything that human beings make shapes culture.

In 1979 the flamboyant artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude (in our culture, people signal artistic flamboyancy by using only their first names) conceived of a project called *The Gates*. They imagined lining the paths of New York City’s Central Park with saffron-colored curtains mounted on steel arches. A proposal to the New York City Parks Department was rejected—the department said that Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s proposal was “in the wrong place and the wrong time and in the wrong scale”—and the idea languished in their studio, dormant though never forgotten, for more than twenty years. Only a few people in the community of artists knew about the project.

The vision for *The Gates*, as with all art and all culture, was to make something of the world—in this case, the “world” of Central Park, which is itself a grand exercise in world making by the landscape designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Even when *The Gates* was just a set of sketches and pastel drawings, it was already a cultural good in one sense—the work of human beings trying to make something of the world.

But if *The Gates* had never been actually produced, it would never have become a fully realized cultural good. Go back to the diagnostic questions we asked in chapter one and imagine asking them of *The Gates* in the year 1999 when it was just a collection of sketches, proposals and maps, along with further ideas found only in the artists' imaginations and conversations. *What does The Gates, circa 1999, assume about the way the world is? What does it assume about the way the world ought to be?* We could certainly answer these questions. *The Gates*, circa 1999, assumes the existence of Central Park, its significance in the life of New York City and its wider significance as an emblem of the possibilities of urban spaces. It assumes the chilly, leafless, barren terrain of a New York February (the project was always envisioned for mid-winter). It assumes that the world should be adorned, at least from time to time and temporarily, with billowing fabrics that reveal and yet sometimes also conceal paths, hills and valleys. It assumes—in significant tension with many artists' convictions, especially in the modern and postmodern eras—that art should be colorful, accessible, fun and free to the public.

But then move on to the next three questions. *What does The Gates, circa 1999, make possible? What does it make impossible, or at least much more difficult? What new forms of culture are created in response?* We're stuck. There is little to say because *The Gates*, twenty years after it was first proposed, had had almost no effect to speak of. About the only cultural artifacts that had been created in response were a few bureaucratic documents categorically rejecting the artists' proposal. And perhaps those documents did make some things impossible, or at least much more difficult, if they discouraged other would-be flamboyant artists from proposing any such works for Central Park. *The Gates*, circa 1999, was an artifact—a human effort to make something of the world—but it was not yet fully culture. Which is another way of saying that it was not yet—and as far as its creators knew, might never be—shared by a public.

Culture requires a public: a group of people who have been sufficiently affected by a cultural good that their horizons of possibility and impossibility have in fact been altered, and their own cultural creativity has been spurred, by that good's existence. This group of people does not necessarily have to be large. But without such a group the artifact remains exclusively

personal and private. It may be deeply meaningful to its owners—Christo and Jeanne-Claude may have treasured their sketches and maps in the privacy of their studio—but it has not reshaped the world for anyone. At least not yet.

As it happened, in 2003 a new mayor and new parks commissioner finally approved a somewhat revised proposal for *The Gates*. Michael Bloomberg, a successful businessman turned mayor, was clearly motivated more by millions of dollars in potential tourist revenue than any intrinsic artistic merits of the work itself. Christo and Jeanne-Claude had modified their plan so that no trace would be left when the installation was removed, and they themselves underwrote the \$20 million in costs with proceeds from sales of their other works. And Central Park was a different place that it was in 1979, thanks to various cultural developments—cleaner, safer, more hospitable and far more widely visited by New Yorkers and out-of-town visitors alike. On February 12, 2005, “*The Gates*, Central Park: 1979-2005” unfurled for a sixteen-day run.

Hundreds of thousands of city residents and visitors walked through the park during those sixteen days. And suddenly it became possible to answer the three questions that were unanswerable before. *What did The Gates make possible?* Artists and city officials answered this question differently: the artists could point to the ways that the installation helped visitors see Central Park’s winding paths afresh; the mayor pointed to the revenue the city earned from the influx of tourists. *What did The Gates make impossible, or at least much more difficult?* It made it impossible to reserve a hotel room in Manhattan during the two weekends of the installation—normally not a problem in the dead of winter. The artists’ willingness to fully fund their own artwork, praised by Mayor Bloomberg, might well make it more difficult for public support of the arts, especially grand public installations, to gain widespread support. *What new culture was created in response?* Newspapers and magazines published articles celebrating, criticizing and interpreting the project; reproductions of the artists’ sketches and drawings, formerly languishing in their studio, were sold at a premium to eager buyers, with the proceeds funding a New York arts foundation; and no doubt, the fertile imaginations of Christo and Jeanne-Claude were already at work on an even grander project somewhere in the world, its prospects

enhanced by the popular success of their venture in Central Park.

REAL ARTISTS SHIP

Culture making requires shared goods. Culture making is *people* (plural) making something of the world—it is never a solitary affair. Only artifacts that leave the solitude of their inventors' studios and imaginations can move the horizons of possibility and become the raw material for more culture making. Until an artifact is shared, it is not culture. In the pithy words attributed to Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs when his engineers were tempted to put off the release date of the first Macintosh: "Real artists ship." Jobs was willing to flatter his engineers, with their attention to detail and passion for perfection, by calling them artists—but he also was calling them back to the fundamental requirement of every software developer, to "ship" a working product to a wider public.

In February 2005, *The Gates* shipped. It crossed the threshold from personal project to shared cultural good. And yet, at another scale, *The Gates* never set sail at all. For billions of people, *The Gates* came and went without notice, moving no horizons and generating no new cultural artifacts. Indeed, if you live far from New York City, *The Gates* may not have had the slightest cultural effect on you until you read these pages. For a few million people, at least for a few weeks in February 2005, *The Gates* was culture, but for most of the world it might as well have stayed in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's studio.

So just as we can't speak of culture without speaking of particular artifacts and specific things, we can't speak of culture without speaking of particular "publics": specific groups of people who are affected by particular acts of making something of the world. Once again, we're reminded of the danger of talking about "the Culture," as if it were an undifferentiated, single thing. Just as we must always ask which cultural goods are meant by a reference to "Culture," we must also ask which public receives and responds to those goods. If real artists—and real engineers, lawmakers, novelists and general contractors—ship, they have to have a real shipping address. Beyond the addresses where their cultural artifacts arrive, those artifacts are not culture at all.

The insight that culture has many different addresses, and that not

every cultural good affects the same public, is the most basic form of “multiculturalism.” Multiculturalism begins with the simple observation that the cumulative, creative process of human culture has happened in widely different places, with widely different results, throughout human history. Before the rise of modern technologies of communication and transportation, the work of culture making could be going on simultaneously in myriad locations, each cut off from the next. Over thousands of years, one generation made something of the world and handed on an enriched (but perhaps also, in other ways, impoverished) world to the next. As this process was repeated over and over, in realms from the preparation of food to the nature of political authority to the stories that were told to make sense of the stars, cultures developed—historically continuous traditions of a particular, multigenerational public who shared a set of common cultural goods, handed on and honed by countless culture makers who “shipped” to their neighbors and their descendants. The Greeks, and the writers of the New Testament, called these various cultural traditions *ta ethnē*—the “peoples” or “nations.”

So when we speak of “ethnic” cultures we (making something of the cultural good that is the Greek word *ethnē*) are referring to these extraordinarily complex, rich collections of traditions of culture making, each rooted in a particular set of times and places. But we should not be misled by the common associations of the word *ethnic*. In many American supermarkets you can still find an “ethnic food” aisle—as if only some kinds of food participate in a particular cultural tradition. Nonsense—all food is “ethnic.” Real cooks ship too, and they ship to particular addresses.

COURTHOUSE CULTURE

My first—and so far, only—visit to a court of law came when I was twenty-six years old, a newlywed in search of a new name.

Few aspects of any culture’s world-making project are as deeply rooted as the traditions of marriage, the set of cultural practices that make sense of men and women, our passionate and sometimes unruly affections for one another, and our capacity to conceive and nurture children. In my case, my culture, as expressed in the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, didn’t quite make sense of the world as I understood it. When

Catherine Hirshfeld and I had filled out our marriage certificate, it was easy enough for her to change her name to reflect the biblical teaching that we were creating a new family by making our marriage vows to one another—she could simply change her last name to match mine, and change her former family name to her middle name. But on the “groom” side of the marriage certificate there was no way to change my name—even though my religious tradition, perhaps hinting at the matriarchal assumptions of one stage of Jewish history, said that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Why couldn’t my name, too, reflect that new identity that had been sealed in our promises to one another?

So I was off to probate court to legally change my name to match Catherine’s: we would each have her family name as our middle name, and my family name as our last name. I would leave behind my middle name Bennett, along with its ties to my mother’s family, not to mention my childhood pride in the initials ABC, and become Andrew Hirshfeld Crouch.

But first I had to find the courtroom.

I walked into a vast hall echoing with footsteps and voices. Corridors led in several directions, marked with cryptic signs. A bored-looking woman wearing a badge sat behind a desk. When I explained my purpose she pointed vaguely down one of the hallways.

After wandering in that general direction I finally found the courtroom where my petition could be heard. When I finally reached the judge’s bench to make my simple request, I found my heart pounding and my throat dry. I stammered out my reason for changing my name, answered a few questions from the brusque though not unkind judge, and was done. I left the courthouse feeling the same mixture of triumph and exhaustion one sees on the faces of people who finish a triathlon.

I learned several things about culture during my visit to probate court.

The courthouse was, in one sense, part of my culture as an American citizen. But it was a sphere of culture I had no prior experience in. My feelings of dislocation and unease visiting the courthouse were not so different from the way I have felt when traveling in countries where I don’t speak the language. In both cases, I found myself thrust into a world-making tradition, with its own history, its own initiates who were fluent

in the culture. Though I hadn't left America—or even my own regional, ethnic and linguistic corner of America—in visiting the courthouse I had still entered a new sphere of culture, where I felt anxious and helpless. I suddenly understood why lawyers are such a good idea.

I also learned something about cultural power. Within the courthouse, of course, there were people with official power. The bailiff at the desk had a degree of power, the judge at the bench had even more. But quite aside from roles and titles, the daily inhabitants of the courthouse, whatever their position in its hierarchy, had a kind of power that came merely from being fluent in that sphere of culture. They knew their way around; they even knew who had official forms of power, and that knowledge was a kind of power in itself.

For a few moments, in an admittedly very limited way, I experienced what it is like to be poor. Poverty is not just a matter of lacking financial resources; it can also simply mean being cut off from cultural power. To be poor is to be unable to “make something of the world.” On first entering the courthouse I had no idea how to make something of its world. Only because I actually was not at all poor—I speak English, I am a fairly confident person, and I have the good fortune to live in a country where however vague and bored they may be, bailiffs are still expected to help ordinary citizens—was I able to navigate through the courthouse's unfamiliar culture and remake one of the most fundamental aspects of my world: my name.

SPHERES OF CULTURE

The courthouse is just one of a host of spheres of culture. Thinking just in terms of buildings, consider the unique cultural features and the particular forms of world making embodied in a mall, a sewage treatment plant, a bank, a high school cafeteria, an auto dealership, a prison, a television studio, a resort hotel, a hospital, a high-rise office building, a library, a dentist's office, a semiconductor fabrication plant, a bar or—last but not least—a church. In each of these places, people are making something of the world. But the culture of each building, and the culture of the more abstract sphere they represent—retail, water treatment, banking, education and so on—has its own history of making and remaking, of

possibility and impossibility. Many things that are entirely possible in a cafeteria—say, a food fight—are all but impossible in a dentist’s office, and vice versa.

These various spheres do overlap and influence each other—that is to say, they affect one another’s horizons of possibility and impossibility. The culture of the sewage treatment plant has a great deal to do with the culture of the resort hotel, though the guests may never realize it: without sewage treatment for hundreds of rooms, the hotel could not exist. The bank’s formal and informal lending policies affect how many cars the dealership can afford to have on its lot. Workers in the high-rise office building may prefer their church culture to be like their office’s—pleasantly anonymous, professionally cleaned and well supplied with parking.

Certain spheres of culture also have special powers. Every building required the approval of local (and sometimes regional and national) government officials before it was built. Furthermore, the culture that each building represents is constrained by laws that the government enforces. Other spheres of culture do not have the same coercive power as the government, but they are no less influential. Educational institutions pass on some kinds of knowledge and not others; mass media select a certain set of images and ideas to set before the public; retailers choose to offer some products and not others to consumers. These spheres of culture can profoundly shape the horizons of possibility and impossibility far beyond their own borders, as when a cell phone sold in the mall is carried into the library, the dentist’s office and the church, creating the possibility of instant communication, and instant interruption, in all of those places.

SCALES OF CULTURE

Just as there are many different *spheres* of culture—different encapsulated traditions of world making—so culture happens at many different scales. I wrote a good portion of this book in the Gryphon Café in Wayne, Pennsylvania, a friendly coffee shop presided over by a pony-tailed thirty-something owner named Rich, staffed by artfully scruffy twenty-somethings and patronized by the bourgeois bohemians of Philadelphia’s Main Line, a crowd that includes bird-like suburban moms with chirping cell phones, groups of intermittently studious students from nearby colleges, and real-

tors looking over property listings with anxious-looking young strivers.

The fact that I can give you a fairly complete description of the Gryphon Café depends on its participation in a broader culture, one that includes coffee shops, ponytails, realtors and bourgeois bohemians. But the culture of the Gryphon Café—the things it makes of the world, the horizons of possibility it creates within its walls, the new culture that its denizens make in response—is not exactly like any other coffee shop. The Gryphon Café is not just making something of the vast world of coffee or the current boom in “third places” all over America fueled by the growth of Starbucks; it is also making something of the lovely building it inhabits at the corner of Wayne and Lancaster Avenues, of local artists who hang their work on its walls, of the availability of artfully scruffy twenty-somethings who somehow can afford to live in an affluent community on a barista’s wages. The horizons of possibility are ever so subtly different here from the horizons at the Starbucks half a mile from my house, which is why I often find it worthwhile to drive the ten miles to the Gryphon to wrestle with ideas and words. Within those horizons, people create new culture—a band called The Bitter Sweet plays on a Tuesday night, a parents’ association gathers here on Thursdays to talk about the public schools, teenagers practice their flirting over hot chocolate on a February afternoon after school.

The Gryphon Café, all seventeen tables and one thousand square feet of it, is a convergence of shared cultural goods. It is a culture. The scale of the Gryphon Café’s culture is small, compared to Christo’s *Gates*, and it certainly depends on many other forms of culture on a larger scale. But it is a real enterprise in making something of the world, with real cultural effects, and just because it is small does not mean it is insignificant or simple. A full description of the Gryphon’s culture could occupy a particularly hedonistic anthropologist for years.

But there are even smaller scales at which culture happens. A basic unit of culture is the family, where we first begin making something of the world. Food and language, two of culture’s most far-reaching forms, begin in the home, which may encompass a “public” as small as two people. It can take us decades to appreciate all the ways in which the culture of our families set our horizons of the possible and the impossible. Until we leave

our families and venture into the homes of our neighbors and friends, or perhaps the family home of our future spouse, we are likely not even to realize all the ways that our family sets our horizons. In one family's culture it is "impossible" for people who love each other to argue with one another; in another family's culture it is "impossible" for people who love each other *not* to argue with one another. One family makes it possible for the whole extended family of aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins and grandparents to gather nearly every week for Sunday dinner; another family barely manages to reunite at Thanksgiving. In one family elaborately spiced meals appear every night from the kitchen; in another comfort food comes by way of the freezer and the microwave. Family is culture at its smallest—and its most powerful.

It is easy to talk as if the culture that matters is culture whose public encompasses millions of people. Certainly a cultural artifact like the English language, which in one way or another touches perhaps two-thirds of the world's population, is of tremendous importance. But to focus only on cultural artifacts of such grand scale is to miss a crucial point, which is that the larger the scale of culture, the less anyone can plausibly claim to be a "culture maker." Who makes the English language? Who decides which new words get admitted into the common vocabulary? Who even can grasp the profusion of forms of English around the world, from the Scottish brogue to an American Southern drawl to the lingua franca of the Indian subcontinent? Culture that is everyone's property is in no one's grasp.

But as we consider smaller scales of culture, we begin to have more meaningful influence over what culture makes of the world. As parents of two children, Timothy and Amy, my wife Catherine and I truly have the ability to make some things possible and others impossible for them and for ourselves—even though our culture making takes place within larger horizons over which we have less control. So the culture of our family makes possible, or at least much easier, music making, bread baking, reading, storytelling, baseball watching and Sunday afternoon tea (and also occasional spasms of collective busyness, prolonged sessions on the Internet, and frantic Sunday mornings before church); it makes impossible, or at least much more difficult, video games, football prowess and fashion-forward dressing (also, all too often, quiet time for mom and dad,

a clean kitchen and prayer). I can do very little about the horizons of the English language, but I can do a lot about the culture of my family. For better and for worse, it is what Catherine and I have made it.

Likewise, in her work as a professor of physics, Catherine can do much to shape the culture of her courses and her research lab. In the somewhat sterile and technological environment of a physics laboratory, she can play classical music to create an atmosphere of creativity and beauty. She can shape the way her students respond to exciting and disappointing results, and can model both hard work and good rest rather than frantic work and fitful procrastination. By bringing her children with her to work occasionally she can create a culture where family is not an interruption from work, and where research and teaching are natural parts of a mother's life; by inviting her students into our home she can show that she values them as persons, not just as units of research productivity. At the small scale of her laboratory and classroom, she has real ability to reshape the world.

As we move out from our own home or workplace, we move into larger scales of culture. When we moved to Swarthmore, the small town in Pennsylvania where we now live, we entered a cultural world very different from Cambridge, the city we had just left. And our town's local culture participates in larger layers of culture—the culture of southeast Pennsylvania, the culture of the United States, the culture of the North Atlantic nations. To understand the culture of my little four-person nuclear family, you also need to understand the myriad scales of culture that surround it, radiating out like concentric circles from our household to the four-thousand-year-old project of Western civilization. To understand the culture of Catherine's laboratory, you also need to understand the college where she teaches, the broader worlds of physics and academia, and the extraordinary human enterprise of scientific investigation and discovery. Each of those circles contributes to what Catherine, our children and I can imagine as possible and impossible—each circle constrains us and sets us free.

FINDING OUR PLACE IN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

If human beings stayed in one place for eons, then the different scales of culture might look like the ripples outward from a single pebble land-

ing in a lake. But because people are constantly on the move, cultural circles overlap almost everywhere in the world, and nowhere in such an intricate pattern of mutual influence as the United States. My family preserves some of the cultural heritage of the American Midwest and South. Down the street is a Jewish family who participate in a set of concentric circles that trace their way back to the ancient nation of Israel. Across from them is a couple who have been shaped by the concentric circles that made twentieth-century China. Two blocks over is a family whose African American culture was decisively shaped by the Atlantic slave trade centuries ago.

When we talk about cultural diversity, we are often thinking of the ripples that have been imported through centuries of such voluntary and involuntary movement across cultures. The diversity of a country like America is sustained by countless choices about which cultural world we will inhabit, where we will settle down to our world-making project. My choice to drive to the Gryphon Café, to make something of (and make something within) the horizons it generates, reinforces certain cultures—the culture of the independently owned coffee shop, the culture of bourgeois bohemia, the culture of the automobile—and leaves other cultural spheres and scales untouched and untended. When my African American neighbor passes by the Italian American-owned barbershop in our town on his way to a black-owned barbershop six miles away, he is not just prudently calculating that the culture of Italian American barbering has no idea what to make of what the prophet Daniel called “hair like pure wool”—he is also reinforcing his link to a culture that could otherwise become distant and irrelevant.

So finding our place in the world as culture makers requires us to pay attention to culture’s many dimensions. We will make something of the world in a particular ethnic tradition, in particular spheres, at particular scales. There is no such thing as “the Culture,” and any attempt to talk about “the Culture,” especially in terms of “transforming the Culture,” is misled and misleading. Real culture making, not to mention cultural transformation, begins with a decision about which cultural world—or, better, worlds—we will attempt to make something of.

Some people choose a set of cultural ripples that was not originally

their own. When they do so in pursuit of economic or political opportunities, we've traditionally called them "immigrants"; when they do so in pursuit of evangelistic or religious opportunities, we've called them "missionaries." But as the wheels within wheels overlap more and more in a mobile world, most of us have some choice about which cultures we will call our own. We are almost all immigrants now, and more of us than we may realize are missionaries too.

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