

The Glorious Inefficiency of Local Bookstores

Our family lives in the kind of town most people only see in fiction: an archetypal, small, Midwestern town of picket fences and blocks of mostly modest bungalows. Homes lining our main streets are, however, far from modest. Along these stand stately nineteenth-century dwellings, lovingly maintained, in spite of the increasing expense of doing so. Our downtown, unlike those of many similar places, isn't in bad shape, which is to say it still has businesses where customers can buy things, some of which are even useful.

The most improbable of these commercial relics is our bookstore. What should have disappeared long ago as a victim of the twin onslaughts of globalism and e-commerce is still going strong. At least, it was yesterday, when I stopped in to browse. The experience of shopping there, in this little shop devoted to the passing away pastime of reading, is like visiting a shrine. It has more the air of a memorial than of a functioning, money-making operation.

The elegiac atmosphere is part of the appeal. This bookstore, this artifact from a more literate past, serves as a reminder of values that have, in America, faded like pages in a weathered volume. The small, independent bookstore is simply a place out of sync with contemporary culture, chiefly because its very being emphasizes an appreciation of quietude, romance, and the kind of glorious inefficiency upon which the best of human life rests.

Like its cousin the public library, the bookstore once connoted the posture of reflective quiet that digesting a good book requires. No longer. Just try to find some quiet now. Since my childhood in the 1970s, America has moved toward a louder and louder public life. Here are some things that just

weren't there in decades past: television screens in every hospital waiting room, at every gas station pump, bank, and restaurant all inserting their messages at a louder-than-necessary volume into your consciousness; music played at a shattering volume in every shop; kids walking home from school blaring music from a phone in the pocket; some other kid playing video games wherever he goes.

We have lost all sense of aural propriety. Even the big bookstores have fallen prey to this noisy trend with their espresso machines, beeping registers, and background music. There is now no refuge for a man seeking to escape the clatter and listen to his thoughts alone. There is no refuge, except, of course, in our little bookstore downtown. There, a man can sit. Usually, there's little music here, just the sound of muffled, cheerful conversation and the rustle of pages.

This lack of noise alone makes the bookstore quite unusual. As if to emphasize the point, deep comfortable chairs invite customers to sit and stay. With a book or without, those chairs are an infrastructure that encourages patrons to slow down, sit, and ponder. In a society devoted to novelty, speed, and shallow pursuits of every variety, a place that encourages the slow process of reflection also encourages a kind of rebellion. Sit there long enough, and you'll find yourself moving away from modern culture whose success requires, above all, a population averse to meditation.

Only through embracing the quiet can we perceive the Romantic nature of the small bookstore. By "Romantic," I mean not the tropes we associate with passionate and sexual love, but rather, all those things that, like such loves, point to realities beyond themselves. All things Romantic hint at transcendent realities beyond the mundane, and the small bookstore is one of these things.

Thus does the bookstore mirror its stock. Books—good ones, anyway—point beyond themselves. It could not be otherwise

because books are only collections of words, and the Word, the quintessential symbol, exists entirely to point beyond itself to some other, more concrete reality.

Our time is hostile to this fact. As Neil Postman pointed out more than thirty years ago, we have surrendered the typographic mind, that way of structuring the intellect to reflect the nature of the written word. Instead, we have become a culture of minds structured like the image, a mode of communication that for all the power and intensity it conveys is self-contained, that does not necessarily, as the Word must, refer to something outside itself. An image-oriented society will always be more shallow than one shaped by the word, for this very reason. Shallow cultures and the people they produce are therefore profoundly anti-Romantic.

Moreover, our time is also hostile to the Romantic because of its thoroughgoing materialism. When the dominant view in a culture is that nothing beyond the physical exists, places and objects whose being naturally directs our attention away from themselves to something beyond it are routinely devalued. Instead, we favor whatever emphasizes the physical, the here and now, the immediate reward. Thus has courtly love given way to the ravages of the sexual revolution, and Saint Francis, who saw the transcendent reflected in every created thing, is replaced with the likes of Harvey Weinstein, who sees but flesh.

As with sainthood, so with the local bookstore. According to this website, about 10,000 bookstores remain. That's down from around 13,000 in 1997. But, independent bookstores like the one in our town make up less than 2,000 of that number. When all that matters is the physical, commercial transaction, you might as well shop on Amazon. Since there is nothing beyond the act of buying involved in purchasing a book now, you might as well order it online and save yourself the hassle of going outdoors. The act of visiting any local place, whether bookstore or church, to contemplate the transcendent reality

it represents, becomes little more than a waste of time.

Amazon is much more efficient. Just tap, click, and wait. Sooner or later, your books will be delivered to you, hassle-free. You don't even have to talk to anybody. For efficient delivery of the desired good, you can hardly beat Amazon.

But, efficiency is a virtue the modern world has elevated out of all proportion. It is far from the highest good. And the worship of efficiency for its own sake, especially when concern for it eclipses all other concerns, is not a conservative habit. Efficiency is the virtue of the machine, of the bureaucracy, of the soulless functionary who cannot or will not see the meaning hidden behind the sacrifices his god demands.

Shopping at the local bookstore, by contrast, is infinitely less efficient. First, you have to get there. Whether you are fortunate enough to live within walking distance, or whether you have to drive, travel time is still required. Then, you might have to browse, and browsing, as everybody knows, is a waste of life. Then, of course, there's a good chance you will have to talk to someone. Making conversation is time-consuming with the best of people, but by stepping out into public you run the risk of having to make conversation with someone who displeases you, someone whose conversational skills are less than expert, whose insights are less than dazzling. If the book you want is not on the shelf, you'll have to order it, and that means waiting, too.

In all these ways, the local bookstore is a less efficient method for acquiring books. But, only a philistine thinks the point of going to a bookstore is to acquire a book. The point of going to the bookstore is to experience its glorious inefficiency, its Romantic signaling of something transcendent, its countercultural cultivation of quietude and dignity.

The preservation of these qualities, the qualities which the remnant of independent local bookstores represent, ought to preoccupy conservatives. It is we, those who most ardently resist the values of our age, who ought to be about the business of actively cultivating all that the small, independent bookstore betokens. Regardless of what they stock, such places serve as an outpost of ideas and attitudes our culture has rejected, an oasis of value in a copious sea of junk.

Unfortunately, we conservatives are too often in the grip of the kind of free-market fanaticism that fetishizes global competition and its twin evil, efficiency. In this, as in so many other things, conservatives have operated in ways counter to our professed goals. Like everything else in modern America, our conservatism is shallow, geared not toward the active cultivation of institutions which, like the neighborhood bookstore, propound in their very being lasting values, but rather geared toward reflexive hatred of Democrats and kneeling football players.

For this reason, movement conservatism has something dire in common with the local, independent bookstore: Both could disappear. Preventing that will require turning conservatives' attention away from the daily convulsions of the mainstream media and back to deep reflection on the lasting virtues of the true, the good, and the beautiful. We must deepen our hearts and refine our minds if we desire a future that reflects all we hold dear. Such a change can only happen, of course, on the individual level by those willing to sit a while, willing to read and consider, willing to be quiet and inefficient. If you are willing and are wondering how to get started, just ask me. I know a great little bookstore that can help.

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