

A Body Without a Soul: Is That the State of Our Culture?

An older man with a Van Dyke beard often visits my favorite coffee shop. Eventually, a mutual friend introduced us.

This gentleman, who once taught philosophy and served as president of a small Catholic college, began talking to me of Heidegger and Hegel, of various philosophical movements in the nineteenth century, and of capitalism and socialism. It was more a classroom lecture than a conversation, with me nodding my head and asking an occasional question.

When he had finished, I told him in all seriousness that he should write down what he'd just said. Some magazine would surely be interested in publishing his thoughts. He just laughed and went on his way.

I retained little of the professor's lecture, not because he wasn't lucid, but because of the sheer amount of information he delivered in just 25 minutes. On the subject of philosophy, he is an intellectual giant, while I am a pygmy.

But one remark did stick. He was talking about materialism when he suddenly stopped and asked, "When does death occur?"

His question seemed to come out of nowhere. I shrugged.

He wagged a finger at me. "When does death occur?"

The professor waited, and when I didn't respond, he said, "When the soul leaves the body." He paused, then said, "Many people today are obsessed with material goods, with sex and money, with living the good life, with the flesh. Few pay attention to the soul." He looked beyond me toward the window. "Which means we have a dead culture. The soul has left the

body.”

I recorded his words as soon as he departed, wondering: Is he right? Are we indeed a culture without a soul?

In September, 2019, Derek Thompson [wrote](#) “Elite Failure Has Brought Americans to the Edge of an Existential Crisis” in *The Atlantic*.

In 1998, The Wall Street Journal and NBC News asked several hundred young Americans to name their most important values. Work ethic led the way—[naturally](#). After that, large majorities picked patriotism, religion, and having children.

Twenty-one years later, the same pollsters asked the same questions of today’s 18-to-38-year-olds—members of the Millennial and Z generations. The results, [published last week](#) in The Wall Street Journal, showed a major value shift among young adults. Today’s respondents were 10 percentage points less likely to value having children and 20 points less likely to highly prize patriotism or religion.

The nuclear family, religious fealty, and national pride—[family, God, and country](#)—are a holy trinity of American traditionalism. The fact that allegiance to all three is in precipitous decline tells us something important about the evolution of the American identity.

Family, love of country, and belief in a deity: it is on this three-legged stool that our culture sits.

Thompson blames this shift away from traditional values on economic failure, writing:

What Americans young and old are abandoning is not so much the promise of family, faith, and national pride as the trust that America’s existing institutions can be relied on to provide for them.

Thompson ably demonstrates how many people, especially the young and the poor of all races, have lost their bearings through financial hardships. However, he makes no mention of the enormous gains in jobs and the increase in wages of the last three years.

Besides, economics alone can't explain the abandonment of family, country, and God.

Life can be a dicey proposition. One day you come home from work and find your wife dying of an aneurysm. The company where you had a cushy job goes belly up. You fall victim to a virus and end up in a hospital bed wondering whether you will live or die. Even as I write these sentences, stocks on Wall Street are crashing down like pins in a bowling alley.

Lady Luck is not always a lady. She can be a serpent, and when she strikes, most of us seek succor from family and faith.

Yet of these traditional values and of the young Americans who no longer believe in them, Thompson has the audacity to write "Why in the name of family, God, or country would such a person lust for such ancient affiliations? As the kids say, *#BurnItAllDown.*"

By all means, burn it all down. But what does that leave you with other than smoke and ashes?

There are some key factors missing from Thompson's analysis of this sea change in our culture. For years now, our educational institutions from kindergarten to graduate schools have taught students all of America's flaws, and none of its virtues. Colleges were launching attacks on the family when I was student over 40 years ago. As for God, He got the boot from the public square at about the same time.

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