

The Balance of the Western Society

Magic is something that Western society does not place much emphasis or importance on. In tribal cultures, such as those visited by David Abram, shamans control magic and keep a balance between the tribal society and nature. The balance that exists is vital to the functioning of their society. David Abram discusses the idea of magic in his work, "The Ecology Of Magic". Abram speaks of the purpose of shamans and their power to keep the balance within the tribal society. Peter Drucker in his work, "The Age of Social Transformation", discusses the rise of the knowledge society and the function of the knowledge workers. Drucker also addresses the need for a balance within this society. Henry Petroski discusses the idea of failure and how almost everything is subject to failure in his work, To Engineer is Human. The imbalance that Abram views in the Western society is due to the uprise of knowledge workers and their susceptibility to various failures. Thus, the Western society is in need for a sector, such as the social sector, to provide a balance much like the shamans provide for the tribal culture.

Abram discusses the magician and where his knowledge is applied within the tribal cultures. Abram says, "For the magician's intelligence is not encompassed within the society; its place is at the edge of the community, mediating between the human community and the large community of beings upon which the village depends for its nourishment and sustenance" (Abram 3). The shamans stay in a strategic location so that they can keep a balance between nature and the community. For the knowledge society, the intelligence is encompassed within the society not on the outskirts like the shamans. Drucker describes knowledge workers and the importance of their application of intelligence within the society.

Drucker says, “They require a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge” (Drucker 253). Our society places great emphasis on intelligence and “formal education” being applied within the community, while the indigenous tribal cultures that Abram studied placed a much greater emphasis on magic and intelligence being at the “edge of the community”. Our society looks toward logic within the culture more than the unseen or mystical. Thus, the Western society is not one in which magic is particularly looked at as important like that of the indigenous tribal cultures.

The knowledge workers are on a rise within our society. No longer do we depend on medicine men or spiritual healers like those of many tribal cultures, now we place great emphasis on doctors and surgeons or those people who have degrees in specific areas. Drucker says, “The newly emerging dominant group is ‘knowledge workers’...By the end of this century knowledge workers will make up a third or more of the work force in the United States...” (Drucker 253). Knowledge workers make up the majority of our society and because of the many areas that knowledge workers have improved our everyday lives, Abram sees these endeavors as the cause for great imbalance within society. Abram feels that there should be a much greater influence on attending to things of nature like the shamans do. When Abram returned to the United States he was surprised at how oblivious humans are to nature. Abram says,

“To be sure, our obliviousness to nonhuman nature is today held in place by ways of speaking that simply deny intelligence to other species and to nature in general, as well as by the very structures of our civilized existence – by the incessant drone of motors that shut out the voices of birds and of the winds, by electric lights that eclipse not only the stars but the night itself; by air

‘conditioners’ that hide the seasons; by offices, automobiles, and shopping malls that finally obviate any need to step outside the purely human world at all (Abram 20).”

The air conditioners, offices, malls, and electric lights that Abram speaks of here were all made by the majority of the population, which are the knowledge workers. It is the rise of the knowledge society and the increase in knowledge workers that are responsible for the desensitization of humans to nature, which has the effect of an unbalanced society.

With the rise of the knowledge society, failures will be prevalent throughout our society. Henry Petroski discusses the ideas of failure and how all human endeavors are susceptible to failure. Petroski says, “Engineering is a human endeavor and thus it is subject to error” (Petroski 444). Petroski uses the example of engineering, but really any effort or field from a knowledge worker can be applied here. Those efforts to improve society by the knowledge workers are tremendous efforts, but they are only “human endeavors” and they are susceptible to failure. Drucker says,

“The knowledge society is a society in which many more people than ever before can be successful. But it is therefore, by definition, also a society in which many more people than ever before can fail, or at least come in second. And if only because the application of knowledge to work has made developed societies so much richer than any earlier society could ever dream of becoming, the failures, whether poor people or alcoholics, battered women or juvenile delinquents, are seen as failures of society” (Drucker 263).

Petroski’s idea that all human endeavors are susceptible to failure is seen when Drucker discusses poor people and juvenile delinquents. Drucker’s examples are all effects that the

rise of the knowledge society has had on our own society. Our knowledge society is a “human endeavor” and thus the knowledge society is one in which “many more people than ever before can fail”. With this rise of the knowledge society comes the increase in failures.

When engineers have structures that collapse and fall, there is obviously strain on society. Fortunately, Abram would argue that it is because of all of the technologies that exist within our society that we endure such traumatic experiences like those of the collapse of bridges and buildings. According to Petroski, these failures aid to improvements. Petroski says, “Success may be grand, but disappointment can often teach us more. It is for this reason that hardly a history can be written that does not include the classic blunders, which more often than not signal new beginnings and new triumphs” (Petroski 448). In Petroski’s world of engineering there are frequent failures and mistakes with structures, because we lack the magic of shamans to mediate between society and nature. We rely on the knowledge workers, but as Petroski showed us, there are no guarantees with human fixtures or inventions. Abram says that the shamans are able to warn of earthquakes and other natural storms. Abram says,

“ To humankind, these Others are purveyors of secrets, carriers of intelligence that we ourselves often need: it is these Others who can inform us of unseasonable changes in the weather, or warn us of imminent eruptions and earthquakes...we glean clues regarding how to strengthen our own dwellings” (Abram 9).

If our society had an appreciation for magic and shamans then our structures might be stronger and would not endure such “blunders”. We would not have to rely on “disappointment to teach us more”, we would have the knowledge the shamans

receive from magic to keep us aware of “imminent eruptions and earthquakes”, thus preventing failure.

Not only does the emerging knowledge society cause structural problems, but the knowledge society is also viewing a rise in health problems. Drucker says, “Yet in every developed country society is becoming sicker rather than healthier, and social problems are multiplying” (Drucker 263). With the apparent decline of health in our nation one would think that we too would learn from the tribal nations and rely on magic and shamans, but unfortunately our society does not buy into shamanistic ideas. Those people who use magic to cure use it in a way to balance out the society. Abram says,

“The sorcerer derives her ability to cure ailments from her more continuous practice of ‘healing’ or balancing the community’s relation to the surrounding land. Disease, in such cultures, is often conceptualized as a kind of systemic imbalance within the sick person, or more vividly as the intrusion of a demonic or malevolent presence into his body”(Abram 4).

The sickness that Drucker reveals within his work is due to the “development of society”, or the up rise of the knowledge society. If our society looked at diseases and ailments like the sorcerer’s do, then maybe our society would see the need for “balancing the community’s relation to the surrounding land”.

If our society rejects ideas proposed by tribal cultures, one could ask how will society find its balance? Abram sees the imbalance of the Western society as a problem. Abram says, “Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human – made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities”(Abram 15). The one

hope that our society has to maintaining a balance within society lies in the social sector.

Drucker speaks of the idea of the balance within society coming from the social sector.

Drucker says,

The new pluralism has a new problem: how to maintain the performance capacity of the new institutions and yet maintain the cohesion of society. This makes doubly important the emergence of a strong and functioning social sector. It is an additional reason why the social sector will increasingly be crucial to the performance, if not to the cohesion, of the knowledge society (Drucker 269)

Our society is “caught up in a mass of abstractions” but the social sector will provide “cohesion” to the broken apart and dysfunctions of society. The social sector may not use magic tactics as the shamans do, but for the functioning of our failing society, the social sector will help keep a balance.

The importance and stress on magic and magicians has been lost in Western society. It has been replaced with logic and intelligence that is held by knowledge workers. What no one had thought of ahead of time was that failures are prevalent within our society, thus there is a need to help balance our society much like the shamans keep balance within the tribal societies. Our society will need to look to the social sector to find a balance in the ever-changing knowledge society.