



ON THE VALUE OF EXCESS

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The most mundane things can be intellectualized. I often transform my growing-up experiences on New York's Lower East Side into a cultural metaphor, finding clues to today's problems in what has gone before. Yes, there are stone-cold differences between the then and the now. And, yes, things change. But is there more?

I do not know if my experiences were unique because the times were different, and everyone, or almost all, shared the same things, or whether those in Utah and Alabama really were different from the Jews and Italians I knew as a kid. No matter. Whether it boils down to then or to there, the point is that I continue to contrast what happened to me long ago to what surrounds me now, and somehow these memories sharpen my contemporary perspective. Questions such as gun control, violence among the young, universal public education, are made clearer with time, especially lengthy time.

In my early years, I frequented a branch of the public library located on a street with the odd name East Broadway. Odd, because if you know Broadway, you could never confuse East Broadway with the real thing. With Broadway, one doesn't even bother with avenue after the name, or street or road. Broadway is Broadway. It would be less than honest to treat East Broadway as if it had equal standing with the real McCoy. It only runs a short way, not even spanning half the width of Manhattan. Even if it did span Manhattan Island, it would still

be inconsequential, considering how much longer Manhattan is compared to its width. Broadway skitters around a bit, but in the final analysis it is still a North-South boulevard, unlike its poorer namesake. Also, you would think there was some sort of connection between the two, like a Y or a T. But no such connection exists, unless of course, you admit Park Row as a sort of missing link.

However unimpressive, this little street nevertheless carried some rather nice buildings. One was the (now) venerable Jewish Daily Forward Building, later the home of an organization devoted to distributing Bibles to the Chinese, and most recently given over to upscale condominiums. Adjacent, give or take a few city lots, was the Educational Alliance, referred to locally as the Edgies, an affectionate term that could just as easily have been awarded by Jersey Protestants in Lawrenceville to their favorite sports place. Or so it seems to me. New York Jews had their Edgies, and those others, the rich non-Catholics like Cole Porter and the Great Gatsby had their Poochies and their Buffies.

Directly across from the Edgies was this branch of the New York Public Library that by today's standards was totally impossible. In my wildest daydream I cannot conceive of any public building being constructed today as was that place. Even if only a hand-me-down building, something privately built, one would have to go far to find another structure resembling that old library. It might have been some rich merchant's home in years past. Great curving rounded marble steps outside leading to massive brass-encrusted doors, into a marble vestibule and yet another noble sweeping marble stairway to a second floor reference area. I seem to recall that the latter was a reference area, because as I became more at home there, I discovered this floor held original documents relating to early New York City, maps and pamphlets and such. I learned on this second floor that someone named DeLancey, perhaps a governor, was important enough to have been awarded a lasting memorial in the form of a street.

This was a great discovery. Imagine: For me, the sounds,

smells and squalor of Delancey Street were so strong then, that even today, 60 years later, they remain vivid. To have all of this connected to the 18th century merely because of a name, to a time of trees and farms, to a man whose allegiance was to a foreign king-well, that put Delancey Street into an altogether different perspective.

The library downstairs had a children's section in the front of the building, down from the main part of the first floor by two or three steps, with fat brass rails inviting to be held. But other than these rails and the fact that it held picture books, I remember little of this section. What I do recall is that from the rear of this wondrous building I was able to borrow wondrous books. For some reason, *Don Quixote* stands apart, perhaps because it was finished in two days with a box of saltine crackers and lots of raisins. Naturally, much more food was consumed with *Les Miserables*. I read through all of Jack London and Jules Verne. Because of this library, I had visited enough of Shakespeare's plays by the age of twelve to have become somewhat bored with the Bard.

By far the best thing about this place was the journal collection. Current issues were maintained in a rack close to the stairway. There wasn't much traffic to the second floor and so I would sit on the first few steps reading my favorites, the *Illustrated London News* and the *Scientific American*, particularly those pages in the latter that carried reproductions of SA articles that had appeared 50 years earlier. I do not recall ever finding *Time* there. Later, in college, I learned that *Time* was already well established in the mid-thirties, a few years before the period I recall. It is nice to realize, so many years later, that my East Broadway librarians decided that the *Illustrated London News* was more important for their clients than Henry Luce.

How I loved the *Illustrated London News*, its sepia photographs, the wordy precise captions below. To this day, I fail to understand why I so enjoyed those pages describing weird things like riding to the hounds, steeplechase races, garden shows, prize hogs, and events at St. Bartholomew's. At home,

only four or five short blocks away, all we ever read was the Daily News, a not-so-subtle advocate of fascism through now forgotten writers like John O'Donnell and non-writers like Robert R. McCormick. I later understood that the New York Daily News was probably more honest in its politics than the ILN. The Daily News, despite its sickening homage to the German Nazi economy and Charles Lindbergh, always had sufficient vitriol remaining to voice a healthy disrespect of British nobility.

Perhaps what I discovered in the *Illustrated News* was a well-documented contrast between worlds. It was as far from the reality of the moment as what was published in *Astounding Science Fiction*. I glimpsed in those pictures life on another planet.

Like everything else that was at one time sacred, the ILN turned out to be a prime candidate for social deconstruction. I now recall that it went out of its way to avoid speaking ill of the well, and, in fact never spoke of the ill at all. There were then, as now, poor people in England. many of them living not only in London, Glasgow, and Liverpool, but also just down the road from all that rural gentrification that was at the heart of what was so thoroughly described in the *Illustrated London News*. So maybe this memory is a bit tarnished. But not so for my building.

Why, then, is a 60-year old memory of this glorious library a clear metaphor for today's problems? The answer does not lie with the obvious, its role as a gateway for kids in the slums to books and thinking. If anything there is more available today, not only from public libraries, but even more completely, from computers, from television, from all that networked communication stuff. No, there is something less obvious about this love affair with my library on East Broadway. I loved that building for the books and references it made available. But, I also loved the building itself—the marble spaciousness, those heavy brass railings, the large doors, the sweeping staircase. It was an absolute revelation that such magnificence was situated so close to my home, and that I

could visit it whenever I wanted, as if it were my aunt's house. Sure, there were other buildings to love in New York—the American Museum of Natural History and Grand Central Station were particular favorites—but these were not on my streets. This library branch was less than five minutes from my door. I could sit there all afternoon on most days, except Sunday, and in a very real way, it became home.

When I think of kids in today's ghettos, I recall this building and others from my early years, wondering why such buildings are not part of these kids' growing up, and I think that we are all the worse for their loss.

The point is that this building, by its mere presence, connected me to the external culture, to the world as it was elsewhere, most of all to an otherwise faceless government. It is no small thing to be part of a society that builds for the centuries, raising pyramids, coliseums, bridges, and museums. But it is even better if you can personally partake of such structures, especially if you are not a Rameses II or a high priest. Exposing the lowliest of the low to the least arc of the celestial orbit helps these frail souls to find allegiance to the God and Nation that are also responsible for the dreary existence into which they are born.

Who is to blame for what has happened to public buildings, for the loss of yesterday's palaces, for the proliferation throughout our land of those ugly but functional post offices? If you look at the newer, more impressive, time-transcending structures—the Guggenheim, the Getty, the Pei triangle on Constitution Avenue, we can categorize this new wave as either built with *I don't care what it costs* private money or as part of the Washington, D.C. inner Beltway, taxpayer-financed culture. Certainly these showplaces are welcome, but unfortunately they have little to do with people, that is people in their own neighborhoods.

The usual explanation as to why this has occurred is phrased in terms of cost: the price of labor and construction materials costs are up tremendously over 50 or 100 years ago. But, even 50 or 100 years ago, these costs were greater by far

than the really cheap labor days, a few thousand years ago, at Cheops. No, I think the answer is a bit more complicated than mere labor costs. It is not so much that labor costs are high, but rather that today more attention is paid to labor costs.

We live in a special time. I think that there was never a time in history when accountability and efficiency were at the ear-splitting, shrieky volume that is now found throughout the land. It is as if we have all lost our minds, yelling at each other on how the government can save money.

Why? Perhaps we are graduating too many MBAs. Even that fraction of these graduates that do not find meaningful employment (and that has to be a large number if meaningful is taken to be the same as happy) probably find solace in their ability to reduce spending in the face of excessive dreams, or, alternatively, in the dreams of excess. So, even if they can not lead a Fortune 500 company into the largesse of the bullish millennium, they can prepare budgets for their own families. Better yet they can painstakingly peruse local and federal budgets for the mistakes of the unanointed, those who dare to plan in foolish, non-numberless ways, pouncing on them with bottom-line, black and white stark accounting techniques, thereby satisfying whatever MBA-type needs that remains unresolved at the office.

Actually, I am sorry to say, not only the failed MBAs, but all of us enjoy playing captains of industry. It's an intellectual epidemic where the public has been infected with some of the DNA of accountants. We have all fallen prey to this ugly but functional syndrome. In such a world, can we wonder why there is little room for excess? Unfortunately, this sickness has pervaded what, for want of a better word, can simply be called human culture. Sadly, not only are we thinking differently about the world around us, but that part of the world that is so taken with the world, the part that prizes flowers because they are beautiful, the part that represents our innermost humanity, is now being reworked, to ensure that nothing that we express is ever inefficient. Only a few hundred thousand years after the invention of hand tools, we have reached that time in

human history when we are obsessed with trimming the dollar fat from the meat of society. Forget those glimmerings of aesthetics expressed by the Neanderthals in their figurines and the Cro-Magnons in their wall paintings. We have now discovered that beauty is far less important than function.

I wish I knew the reason for this love affair with efficiency. Perhaps it reflects the increasing democratization in 20th century government, allowing each of us to play the role of expert kibitzer, looking over the shoulders of our elected officials. Maybe there is something to be said for the divine right of kings, for those good old days when there was someone in charge, making decisions, good or bad, for the rest of us. Nowadays, any decision made by a mayor or governor or president is rapidly mired in all sorts of contrariety, almost always related to cost. No matter how well intentioned the decision, how far-seeing, and especially no matter how aesthetic, it will always be attacked as too expensive. Small wonder that politicians have learned to suppress whatever creativity and imagination and idealism they may have had originally and instead run for office in terms of how much money they can save. And God help us with those other political adepts who lack the tools upstairs, who not only run on a cost-cutting platform, but really mean it. Past mayors of Chicago and of New York met their abrupt political ends by succumbing to the winds of accountability. They made ill-advised changes in the time-honored (and superbly inefficient) ways in which city labor forces were used to remove large amounts of snow. Efficiency, the public responded, is a good thing, but not if it means I can't get to work the next day.

Most of the short-term cost-cutting approaches taken in the name of efficiency wind up costing us a lot more in the long run. I can't prove this, but examples abound. Government projects are sugarcoated by politicians and their hired bureaucrats by "sending them out for bids". This tomfoolery squares it with the public: all that Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer are concerned about is how much it is going to cost and allowing themselves to be fooled into thinking that no graft occurs in

the process. No matter that bridges and roads and buildings don't last as long as they did in the days when durability was an important consideration. No matter that appearance and aesthetics are of less concern than bottom-line accounting. No matter that if a public official and a contractor want to indulge in some under-the-counter shenanigans, it will occur anyway, regardless of that contrived cover up legalism termed the "lowest-cost sealed bid". Like the beat, the graft goes on. Nowadays it thrives on the three R's somberly written into each "request for proposal": Rules, Regulations, and Restrictions.

And let us not forget Robert S. McNamara and his Whiz Kids, the very models of the modern efficiency mavens, brought into the Defense Department in Kennedy's time to improve spending. Well before McNamara's genius for efficient word-packaging gave us terms like *body count*, *collateral damage*, and *friendly fire*, this crew actually went so far as to insist on a single aircraft on which all the armed services would have to compromise, even though military experts universally counseled otherwise. Of course to accomplish this worthless aim the Whiz Kids had to spend money, letting out contracts to design and build planes that no one would use. Although this nonsense soon disappeared, a vestigial McNamara efficiency is still present in the Defense Department, in terms of General Services, a centralized accounting system that requires centralized purchasing. The public fails to understand that the massive reorganization in procurement foisted on an otherwise functioning Defense Department was really the reason for those expensive screwdrivers and toilet seats that all of us snickered about a few years back. When the purchasing authority was removed from a base commander, a chief petty officer or a supply sergeant, common sense also disappeared.

Actually the type of thinking that says we have to super-organize our expenditures is a close relative of what used to be called time-and-study measures. You watch a guy on an assembly line and determine that he is taking too many steps to accomplish a certain procedure, and either the worker or the

machines are rearranged to achieve a higher level of productivity. In the thirties, there were people hired to “do” time-and-study analyses. But, somehow, these efficiency experts always seemed to be unnecessary add-ons to an industrial culture already well-established, swimming in the wake of Henry Ford, a very smart man who wrote the book on efficiency, but who never thought of himself as an efficiency expert.

Unfortunately, this did not stop with all these Henry Ford wannabes. It was inevitable that this type of thinking became enshrined as an intellectual specialty, the sort where books are written, college courses offered, and the word theory misapplied. This all came to be known as Systems, a gestalt-like approach to any and all projects, human and otherwise. The theme of systems analysts seems to be “let’s get organized.” Because of this new approach, words like planning took on a whole new dimension. The Yellow Pages now include people who can be hired as vacation planners, party planners, and financial planners. Every new business worth its salt has to have a “business plan”. More established firms hire outside experts who provide merger plans, acquisition plans, or whatever other plans management feels inadequate to do themselves. In the past entrepreneurs made money. Now they make plans.

Still another aspect to the elevation of method over substance in the name of efficiency is the recently developed reverence for the term “Management,” used by the anointed as an adjective. Systems and Management are very close. Occasionally they are used to modify the word theory. But one can really stand in awe of that most beautiful of phrases, the Zen-like “Management Ethic”. What I think this means is that no matter what business you are involved in, it can be greatly improved by hiring a systems expert, even though the systems expert knows nothing about your business. It doesn’t matter whether it is a steamship line, a lumber company, a newspaper, a school district, an electric utility, or a small country. This magic elixir known as management theory will take care of whatever ails your company. And, in the best traditions of Zen,

management theory is supposed to make things right with your firm even if there is nothing wrong.

In the course of this snake-oil approach to having a healthy business, there have been a spate of acronyms spawned that make me fearful for the fate of our country. A few years ago it was MBO, Management by Objectives. The most recent addition to the subsequent string of business-friendly 3-fold letters that no one now remembers is TQM or Total Quality Management. Whenever I hear zealots preaching the benefits of TQM I ask: what do these guys think guided businessmen before they were exposed to this mantra? Was it that yesterday's successful entrepreneurs were not *quality* inventors, designers, manufacturers, marketers, and salesmen? Did they fail to understand the advantages of infusing quality into their operations and products? It is clear that there were successes in the business world long before TQM saw the light of day. So perhaps this TQM stuff is supposed to be used by those unfortunates among us who are less than successful, but would like to be, similar to those responding to small ads in the back pages of cheap magazines that promise to get you started as writers or painters, even if you lack talent. One would think that the successful businessman would not bother with such drivel. Sadly, however, when it comes to acronyms, humans, even the most successful, feel compelled to follow the crowd, Deming-like.

The cult of efficiency has reached into the deepest recesses of our American traditions. What better example than what lies in store for public education. Millions of Americans now believe that public education is no longer viable. Why? Because this most venerated part of our unique culture is not efficient. We need Adam Smith to make things right, or perhaps the Edison Project. Or maybe vouchers. Or maybe Charter Schools. The peculiar thing about all of this is that the very crowd that one would imagine cares the most about our traditions, namely the political conservatives, is doing the most to do away with public education.

Deeply embedded in this strange movement is a relatively

new political approach that is misnamed Libertarianism. Touted as a rational extension of the French and American revolutions, wherein individual freedom is extrapolated to an extreme hands-off form of government, Libertarians manage to reject the darker side of anarchy, the anarchy of Bakunin and Sacco and Vanzetti, and instead envision wondrous spending efficiencies that will arise from minimalist government. Of course they are hardly libertarian in the fullest sense of the word. In their daydreams, confrontations between corporate entities and individuals (i.e., people) are invariably resolved in favor of the former.

Perhaps they should be called Minimalists (although that would hardly be fair to the artists of the same name). In my opinion the best possible name for these poor souls is Efficiencialists, or maybe, because of tradition and history and all that, merely TimeAndStudyists, heirs less to the latter half of the 18th century, but far more closely related to the efficiency experts who have come to dominate our culture in the latter half of the 20th century.

Can any of us imagine a present-day Libertarian government allocating anything but the most meager funds to support what otherwise might be termed a library? Something to keep the books dry, probably with no chairs, and certainly no loan privileges (that would require extra staff). It's not likely that, if they were in charge, they would ever support the notion of taxpayer-driven, stand-alone, traditional library buildings, to begin with. Both Libertarians and non-Libertarians alike tell me that libraries, my sort of libraries, now must be regarded as obsolete. Information Technology is the way to go, taking over all the older library functions, whilst adding considerably more, in essence broadening the very concept of library that has been with us since first launched in Alexandria a few millennia back.

It was obvious that the library concept was coming to an end, even some decades ago. The Efficiencialists have been hard at work dreaming up ways to save us money. Not content with expunging beauty because it costs too much, they took

away those old comfortable oaken card cabinets replacing them with microfiche and it is now clear that before long Information Technology will remove the magazines as well, substituting e-journals, aka electronic journals.

Alas, there will be no more *Illustrated London News* in this world, except perhaps on flat monitor screens that are ergonomically positioned to reduce neckstrain. This alas is not for me. I have memory enough to sustain me through this lifetime and beyond. But there are those who will never enter beautiful buildings in their neighborhood, who will never know a book binding, never feel the silk in a journal page. All those future kids in the ghetto will never smell rotogravure print. Where on earth will they learn that there was once an English Governor named DeLancey. No more to sit on curved metamorphic steps, flecked with fossils, surrounded by books and brass. Instead they and everyone else will be plugged into the Technology of Information, the main function of which will be to convey messages by TimeAndStudyists seeking to wring the last bit of feeling out of our already dispassionate lives.

Where have all the flowers gone? To graveyards of efficiency, each and every one.