

Technological Progress and Humanity: Essay 3, Life and the Pursuit of Utility

Our modern myths, education, STEM and the loss of becoming

By Bruce Cuthbertson

In Part 3 of this essay, I turn to the development of us as persons, our myths, our philosophies, our education, much of it driven and influenced by the culture of individualistic and isolationist capitalism.

As I noted in Part 1, our values have been appropriated by our focus on making money. We fear not having enough to live the good life and we also strive to improve our position, our power.

In many ways, this essay and the others in this series is a tribute to some of the forgotten humanist thinkers: to American naturalist Loren Eiseley and American photographer and essayist Wright Morris, both of whom were exactly in their time and still, seemingly before their time, their words perhaps truer today than even when they were written; to the humanist insights and scholarship of mythologist Joseph Campbell; to the passion that John Dewey had for his (and for our) America. These essays come out of a love for this country and for our humanist aspirations.

The Modern Myth

Myths used to be the realm of artists, philosophers and poets, who would share their insights into the questions that haunt us and compel a narrative that might give us a means to reflect our own experience and divine our purpose. They would connect the seen world to the unseen world through metaphor and poetics.

Today, the narratives of our artists, philosophers and poets are largely ignored. They've been replaced, at least in creating our modern myths and perpetuating their framework, by the business class, by entrepreneurs and innovators, by success and celebrity, by those people who inspire awe due to their mere position in life, not by their aesthetic and poetic insight.

Joseph Campbell tells us that all myths have four functions. First, they are to “waken and maintain in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and respect, in recognition of that ultimate mystery...” The innovative class and their narratives of visionary greatness largely compel our sense of awe, even if they're flawed. Steve Jobs nearly singlehandedly created (or became through his flesh and blood the pure conception of) the myth of Silicon Valley. And the bad behavior we see in so many of Silicon Valley's entrepreneurs only reinforces this notion. It's become part of the myth, of the Maverick, of the black sheep. Unfortunately, we've mistaken

what was visionary about Steve Jobs for his abrasive personality. The culture of Silicon Valley and its ambitious entrepreneurs often embrace the abrasiveness, as an expression of overconfidence, without possessing the visionary.

Second, according to Campbell, myths “render a cosmology, an image of the universe.” Today, Campbell tells us, we turn more to science than religious or metaphysical texts for this. The third function is the “validation and maintenance of an established order.” Capitalism and the innovation lottery are largely representative of the established order. All our individual economic pursuits maintain this order. The fourth function is the “centering and harmonizing of the individual,” where the individual gives up oneself to another, to some one or an authority above. In the mythos of Silicon Valley, the individual gives himself up to the innovation lottery winners, to the so-called wisdom of the innovative class, to the narrative they’ve created, of inventing the future. We write books on their accomplishments, always trying to capture the magic that led to success, idolizing them and failing to recognize that innovation is an evolutionary-like system wherein outcomes aren’t predictable.

American naturalist Loren Eiseley, in his 1960 book, *The Firmament of Time*, speaks to the subjugation of the individual, putting it into the context of the pursuit of the future: “The group ethic as distinct from personal ethic is faceless and obscure. It is whatever its leaders choose it to mean; it destroys the innocent and justifies the act in terms of the future.” He continues, “(P)rogress which pursues only the next invention, progress which pulls thought out of the mind and replaces it with idle slogans, is not progress at all. It is a beckoning mirage in a desert over which stagger the generations of men...there is no way by which Utopias—or the lost Garden itself—can be brought out of the future and presented to man. Neither can he go forward to such a destiny. Since in the world of time every man lives but one life, it is in himself that he must search for the secret of the Garden.”

This utopia as the future is the wasteland, where as Campbell says, “poets languish and priestly spirits thrive, whose task it is only to repeat, enforce and elucidate clichés.” The same clichés spoken by those innovators and entrepreneurs, that drive Silicon Valley and progress forward, that are repeated in an endless continuum of books on their accomplishments and lives and the process of their particular vision.

The Reflection in our Mirrors

People become more desperate to reach the right side of the equation and if they can achieve it, to stay there. As we anxiously try to reach the freedom that’s dangled in front of us, we become increasingly willing to compromise our true selves and our greater purpose, and sometimes our ethics, values and foundational belief systems, with hopes of realizing the American freedom of economic wealth.

Each of us has a mirror that we look into occasionally. In it, we long to see the hero, the person who went out on a journey and achieved something, a person who connected with others, who found purpose and was valued and appreciated by the greater world, by humanity. In that mirror, we want to see our value to the world, to society, to others reflected.

Instead, many of us are afraid to bring out this mirror. We fear what we might see in it. We fear that the thread of hope we're hanging onto will be torn, that we haven't lived up to our expectations for ourselves, that the world has beaten us, that the image in the mirror will be more animal than man.

We've wandered off the path so many times that we've lost some of our self-respect. We've come to rationalize the lapses (more to ourselves than anyone else) as we pursue wealth and power but settle for mere survival.

In this rationalization, is born a man who is no longer human. The pursuit of power destroys the consciousness within him. "Because his mind is directed outward upon this power torn from nature," said Eiseley, "he does not realize that the moment such power is brought into the human domain it partakes of human freedom."

As we try to reach the other side, the Emerald City, where freedom and wealth await, we take one step after another, on a strange idea, a philosophy even, that the ends will justify the means. This is the political philosophy of our country, the philosophy of the pursuit of power. It's become a role model for us, for what's acceptable. It says it's okay to stray from the path, that if we can reach the promised land, we can forgive ourselves, simply because we would use our position for good, we might even call it "giving back," to make amends for our own lapses.

We become stuck between the animal in ourselves and the potential that man might become. Perhaps our evolutionary progress wasn't only about acquiring the ability to use tools or the development of speech, but also an ability to survive by deceit and guile, particularly as a small and weak and slow bipedal creature on the savanna. We are not so much a rational man as economists and philosophers have argued at times, but a man of rationalizations.

Nonetheless, we believe the utopia we long for will make the world aright again. And in this, we tuck our mirrors away, sometimes forever.

Science Versus Humanity

As I stand in Silicon Valley and continue to look for signs of humanism, I have to wonder about our future. Our schools focus on STEM, which are built to position workers in America and Silicon Valley's utopia and to indoctrinate them into individualistic "innovation-led" capitalism. STEM is the professionalizing of lower education, preparing us for external lives in the world, for entering the economic system.

None of us can argue that we don't need science and math (scientific progress benefits society), but as Loren Eiseley, Joseph Campbell, Nietzsche, John Dewey and many others before have recognized, education cannot be only about utility and progress and career preparation, about mere survival or advancement in our isolationist system, about external matters.

The problems of society don't need faster scientific progress and a greater individual focus on making money, but more humanistic thinking.

"If all knowledge is of the outside, if none is turned inward," said Eiseley, "if self-awareness fades into blind acquiescence of the mass man, then the personal responsibility by which democracy lives will fade also."

Will the overemphasis on STEM disrupt the coming of age of an entire generation? The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is about the awakening of the self to its own identity and to the wonderment of the world and universe beyond. It is to reflect inward, to find meaning in the new experiences that come with that awakening, to grow into becoming oneself, to connect for the first time, the inner and outer worlds in a holistic understanding and synthesis of meaning. But to put it aside, to defer it, in the name of preparing for career and the external life of adulthood, denies or limits not just each young person's personal awakening, but threatens the whole of society, the whole of civilization.

If we stop reflecting on the past and inquiring about the human in us, if teenagers stop reading Shakespeare and Henry Miller and Mark Twain and Toni Morrison and James Joyce and Charlotte Brontë and Jack Kerouac and Malcolm X and Sylvia Plath, man certainly may be able to survive (if survival is his sole desire), but will mankind deserve to survive if we forget about learning to be human.

"Schoolrooms are not and should not be the place where man learns only scientific techniques," continues Eiseley in *The Firmament of Time*. "They are the place where selfhood, what has been called 'the supreme instrument of knowledge,' is created. Only such deep inner knowledge truly expands horizons and makes use of technology, not for power, but for human happiness."

With an education focused so heavily in sciences, Joseph Campbell once said, not only to his day but to modernity, "There is no time, no place, no permission—let alone encouragement—for experience."

Because we ourselves fear the future and sense the course is not right, we try to position our children to come out on top. There was a time when universities were focused on providing an undergraduate experience in the arts and humanities, in philosophy and the history of man and literature, in artistic and music expression across human existence. But those programs have given way to the more pragmatic and utility focused computer science and technology studies. We've taken it a step further, such that these studies are now a core focus in many K-12 schools.

This isn't to say that we should closet our children's interests. They should have the opportunity to pursue their interests in science, technology, computers, to let their imaginations be compelled and inspired through the pursuit of learning and knowledge. The question becomes, *What's the purpose of an education? Is it to teach skills? Or is it to provide a foundation for growing into an adult, for becoming?* They aren't the same thing.

We long for our own security in this divided world and we shuttle our children forward, forgetting that those years of awakening are unrecoverable. We understand there's no going back, but do our children understand? They will have a lifetime to learn about science and technology, about work and career (the external), but they will grow up once and go through self-awakening that one time. Perhaps we forget even that in the world of adults, successful employment is rarely about skills. It's more about our values, how we get along with one another, what we believe. It's about our humanity. We can often learn the skills for just about any job along the journey, but first, we must know who we are.

If we stop asking ourselves what it means to be human, we'll likely continue to progress, to go forward, but we'll never make progress in conquering humanity's problems. We'll never become what we might.

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