Introductory essay to an interview with Murray Milner, Jr. on American teenagers, schools, and the culture of consumption

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People often ask me how I come up with ideas for features on the Journal. The quick, if question-begging, answer is that I read a lot of periodicals and publishers' catalogs which announce forthcoming books, looking for authors whose work seems to offer some insight into our cultural moment. I said that's a "question-begging" response because it leaves undefined the issue of what criteria I use for identifying potential insight.

Among the criteria for insightfulness is an attention to cultural forms and institutions. One approach to understanding culture is to focus on the ideas and beliefs that are explicitly sustained, and to trace a history or genealogy of ideas. Following the dictum that ideas have consequences, it is thus assumed that the values, practices, and institutions of a culture reflect fundamental beliefs. According to this method, the history of philosophy has a certain pride of place in understanding how a culture's values have taken shape. And if one wants to challenge or change a culture's values or practices, one challenges fundamental beliefs, showing them to be faulty, inconsistent, or of dubious origin.

This is a helpful and often fruitful approach to understanding cultural life, and it would be entirely adequate if human beings were brains in vats, that is, if culture was purely an abstract matrix of ideas.

We are not, however (and praise God), just brains in vats. We are, to borrow a phrase from Marion Montgomery, created rational souls incarnate. We live in bodies in space and time. Our beliefs take shape in cultural forms, and those forms, effected by ideas, become causes of other things, sometimes of further ideas. Ideas have antecedents: they come from somewhere, and not always simply from the cross-pollination of earlier ideas. Values, commitments, and beliefs are all influenced by, sometimes to a great extent, the concrete shape of our life together. So, for example, a body of assumptions about human nature that might be labeled "individualism" contributes to cultural institutions that protect and advance individual autonomy, such as the prevalence of individually owned and operated automobiles as opposed to vigorous public support for mass transit. But living in a society with a complex network of individualistic institutions lends great plausibility to beliefs about the individual. Ideas have consequences, but ideas are also shaped and nurtured in the context of concrete experience.

Now that took a little while to explain, but it should shed some light on the sort of thinkers I am more likely to regard as insightful: those who are exploring the complicated interrelationship between beliefs, values, and cultural forms. I say "exploring" rather than "explaining," because this isn't, as they say, rocket science. Rocket science is much easier, simply a matter of physics and chemistry. The study of how human beings come to assent to certain ideas, how they act on those ideas, and how they act in spite of certain ideas, is a lot more complex and mysterious.

Another way of putting this is to observe that the way we believe shapes the way we live, and the way we live shapes the way we believe. There are no hard and fast laws here. People may live in ways that contradict their beliefs, or believe things that are inconsistent with the way they are living. But there is some relationship between the two. And since certain institutions shape the way we live more than others, they are likely to influence the way we believe as well.

By "the way we live," I don't just mean the explicit ethical choices we make. I'm referring to very mundane, concrete things: whether people live in cities, in the country, or in suburbs, whether they drive to work, whether they live near extended families, whether they change jobs frequently, how much time they spend with their kids and in what circumstances, whether they bowl alone or in leagues. Many of the ways we live are encouraged

by large economic, political, and technical forces, so the range of choice on such things is narrow. One could choose, for reasons of principle, not to own a car, but then the number of places you could live would be extremely limited. One could decide that living close to extended family is healthy and beneficial, but what happens when the company you work for relocates or transfers you job to the other coast?

How we believe is shaped (in some measure) by how we live, and how we live is shaped by larger institutional forces with long histories and powerful momentum (which is why our periodical, committed to understanding contemporary culture, often looks at long-term historical trends).

Christians believe that some ways of living and believing are better than others. And some of us take a rather comprehensive view of this, insisting that Christian conviction begins with what we believe and practice concerning God and sin and grace, but continues into how we understand and pursue law and education and art and farming. Some of us even believe that how we live is more than simply a matter of sustaining kindness, fidelity, and sacrifice, that in fact some forms of social organization do a better job than others at reflecting the kinds of creatures we are. So living well is not simply a matter of holding onto the right ideas and having the best intentions. Living well, under God, involves pursuing a kind of order, cultural forms that accord with the nature of nature and human nature. Truth and goodness, the rational and the volitional aspects of life, are complemented by beauty, the formal element.

So, how do I come up with ideas for features on the Journal? I'm looking for people who will help us understand specific trends and tendencies in contemporary American life, and who share with me some sense that structures and convictions are interrelated. For example, when I first read a description of a new book by sociologist Murray Milner, I learned that he was trying to understand why American teenagers act the way they do toward each other. Why are there increasingly rigid social pecking orders in high schools and ever-more strict boundaries between groups? How do the cool kids learn to be cool, and why are the mean girls so mean? Why is it that coolness is increasingly tied to expensive consumer goods, to something one buys? Does the behavior of teenagers toward one another and with their stuff reflect some prior beliefs about the good life and social belonging, or do beliefs emanate from the behavior, which is induced for other reasons?

Murray Milner's book is called *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption.* As soon as I saw the title, I was intrigued: Milner was looking at three very important social institutions in American culture: the institution of the Teenager, a concept that is only about 60 years old; schools, especially age-segregated, compulsory, universal schooling as we now know it, also a new thing; and the world of consumerism. Three powerfully influential institutions, each of which is so thoroughly established in social experience as to be rendered invisible, and each of which depends on the other to sustain power and influence. As Milner observes, "Our educational system plays a central role, not just in giving people technical skills, but also in molding their desires and ambitions. Life with one's peers, in and out of the classroom, powerfully shapes people's world-views and personalities."

Schools and the structure of schooling orient the affections of our children. How and why are they doing so? There aren't many questions about culture more important than that. As Milner approached this topic and began to research it, he saw that status differences were profoundly important in high school peer relations. Status rankings were so important to high-schoolers that they reminded Milner of earlier research he had done on the caste system in India. There are Brahmans and Untouchables in suburban American high schools as well as in Agra or Calcutta, the difference being that social standing here is a function not of birth, but of coolness derived largely from the display of consumer goods. And why have American teens become more obsessed with status? Milner believes it is because they have new levels of independence but so little real economic or political power. They feel the guiding hand of parents and teachers less than students did in the past, but they still can't make decisions about large matters in their lives. But they have more spending money, so the nexus between the school, the mall, and personal identity is extremely important. And cliques, often savagely exclusive, are the natural result. When we talked about his book, Milner pointed out both the scope and novelty of teenage experience today.