

ANDY CROUCH
CULTURE
MAKING



RECOVERING OUR
CREATIVE CALLING

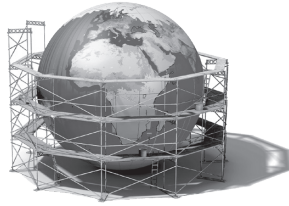
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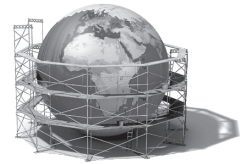
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PART ONE



CULTURE

THE HORIZONS OF THE POSSIBLE



This book addresses a huge topic, so let's begin by making it clear just how huge the topic is.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of what “cultured” people do—hushed art museums and symphony orchestras—although art and music, as well as museums and orchestras, as well as the very idea that some people are “cultured” and others are not, are all part of a particular culture.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of the trends, fads and fashions of the self-proclaimed culture mavens who focus our collective attention on the latest single-named celebrity or the latest piece of technology—though celebrity, technology and mavens are all part of a particular culture, the mass-mediated culture in which we participate every day.

We are not just talking about culture in the sense of ethnic identity, the collection of practices, beliefs and stories that carve out a sense of distinctiveness and pride or failure and shame, or perhaps some of both, in a world where cultural pluralism is widely affirmed and yet the hard realities of history render some cultures more equal than others. Before we finish

we will indeed have to consider our particular cultures, not just culture in general. But not yet.

We are not even just talking about culture in the sense of the governing ideas, values and presuppositions of our society—as it is used in phrases like “culture wars,” “the culture of disbelief” or “the decline of our culture”—although ideas, values and presuppositions are indeed at the heart of every human cultural effort, and the fact that we find them there gives us some clues about culture’s ultimate significance. Nor are we just talking about the ongoing contest in democratic societies to advance one set of ideas, values and presuppositions in the realm of politics and legislation—though laws are among the most dramatic ways that culture is expressed and enforced.

Many attempts, especially Christian attempts, to come to terms with culture have fallen short because they paid too much attention to one of these categories of culture. High culture, pop culture, ethnic culture, political culture—all are part of culture and worthy of attention, reflection and action.

But culture is more than any of these things. And to grasp how much more it is, we need to go deeper down and further back, to the beginning. Actually, we need to go back to three beginnings.

BIRTH

Begin with your own beginning.

You emerged wrinkled and wet, squinting against the light. You wailed in a thin and raspy voice, taking in gulps of unfamiliar air, until someone placed you near a heartbeat you knew even better than your own. Close to your mother’s warmth, you became calm and alert. You opened your eyes, feeling the air on your skin, hearing sounds and voices that once had echoed through your watery cradle, now vivid and distinct. Perhaps your eyes even found a face, somehow recognizing the significance of eyes, nose and mouth, and fixed on it with rapt attention.

A human baby is the strangest and most wonderful creature this world can offer. No other mammal emerges so helpless from the womb, utterly unable to cope with the opportunity and adversity of nature. Yet no other creature holds such limitless possibility. While arguments about nature

and nurture have raged for centuries and will do so for centuries more, everyone agrees that human beings come into the world primed for culture.

Without culture—which begins, for the baby, with recognition of relationship, finding her mother and her father, and goes on in the first few years to what is in some ways the most stupendous of human achievements, the acquisition of language—we simply do not become anything at all. We are hard-wired for nothing but learning. All we begin with are possibilities.

HISTORY

Begin at history's beginning.

We hold lanterns up to cave walls and see that our earliest ancestors were artists. They traced patterns in the clay with their fingers. They sculpted figures, from bison to the female human form, into the rocks, seemingly prompted by the natural shape of the surface. They mixed pigments with mortar and pestle and created dramatically large paintings—a painting of a bison in the cave at Altamira, Spain, is over six feet wide. This highly developed artistic activity was well underway 14,000 years ago. So complex is the work that we find in the caves of Europe, says the writer Paul Johnson, that “it is likely that art was the first of the human professions.”

But we find more than art in humankind's early history. We find tools, like the arrowheads that I collected as a boy on my grandparents' Georgia farm. We find charred circles where our forebears harnessed fire. We find domesticated animals—the skulls of two dogs found in central Russia in 2003 are roughly contemporary with the cave art of Europe. We find toys. And we find tombs.

Those earliest traces of culture do not preserve language. But soon we have records not just of language but of stories. The most durable stories—the ones we call “myths”—wrestle directly with the questions provoked by the existence of the world. Like astronomers who can peer into the history of the universe with powerful telescopes, when we listen to the ancient myths we are encountering the human consciousness just beginning to awaken, and as it awakens it asks: Why are we here? Where did this world come from? Who or what is responsible for the bison so carefully and lovingly portrayed on the cave wall?

Take the *Enuma Elish*, one of those texts from the dawn of human storytelling preserved for us in tantalizingly fragile form on clay tablets from Ashurbanipal's great library at Nineveh. To the people who told and heard this epic, it must have seemed obvious that the world needed a story. The story they told, which archaeologists believe goes back at least to the third millennium before Christ, was the victory of the god Marduk over the serpent Tiamat and her company of monsters. Having vanquished Tiamat, Marduk fillets her, turning one fillet into the heavens and the other into the earth. In one version of the myth, he turns her brood of monsters into the Zodiac, the twelve constellations through which the sun passes in the course of a year.

This is what human beings do: we extract stories even from the stars.

SCRIPTURE

All human beings share the first two beginnings—the universal experience of infancy, and the history of the species. But biblical people emphasize a different beginning, the story recounted in the first pages of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis begins with a Creator, purposeful and pleased with his work. Already in the first sentence, the writer of Genesis stakes out a story very different from the creation myths that were circulating at the time. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” There is no violent conflict among gods and monsters here, no irrepressible and threatening chaos, just the hushed sound of divine breath in the dark. Then comes the stately and measured progression toward the sixth day, the pinnacle of creation:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

You can fill many bookshelves with the three thousand years of conversation sparked by Genesis 1:27. The claim—repeated, poetically and emphatically, twice in one verse—that human beings are made in God's image takes on all the more resonance when we realize that the same people

who wrote and preserved Genesis 1:27 also knew the second commandment, which insisted, “you shall not make a graven image.” The writers of the Bible would have been the first to insist that human attempts at fashioning images of God are doomed to failure or worse. But God, it seems, has no such limitation. God himself makes an “image” of himself. Humankind’s “images of God” are always deficient and destructive, the Hebrew Bible insists, but God’s own “image of God” is the summary of everything he has made, crowned with the words, “It was very good.”

What does it mean that we are made in the image of God? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to ask another: What “image of God” is conveyed by Genesis 1:1-26? The God we meet in these verses, so unlike the alternative gods on offer in the ancient Near East, is first of all a source of limitless, extraordinary *creativity*. For the writers of the *Enuma Elish*, the world was a byproduct of divine conflict. The cosmos of the *Enuma Elish* is grim, with chaos always near. Even human beings, who are Marduk’s crowning achievement, are a response to a divine political problem (as near as we can tell from the fragmentary text): the other gods complain that there is no one to worship them, and Marduk’s “cunning plan” is to create human beings to serve that purpose. In contrast, the writer of Genesis looks at the world, from stars to starfish, and sees a purposeful, engaged, creative intelligence at work. Every “kind” of animal is further testimony to the extraordinary fruitfulness of this Creator’s imagination. The world is not the product of accident or heavenly politics, but of a free, even relaxed, blessed Creator.

However, this Creator also addresses the fundamental concern that lies underneath the *Enuma Elish* and other creation myths—the human sense that chaos is never far away. Genesis 1 is a sequence of acts of *ordering*, as the Creator gradually carves out a habitable environment. The first chapter of Genesis records a series of divisions—order from chaos, light from darkness, heaven from earth, sea from land—each of which makes the world more amenable for the flourishing of creativity.

Another way of putting these two features of creation is to say that Genesis presents God as both Creator and Ruler of the universe. Creators are those who make something new; rulers are those who maintain order and separation.

As an American I’m aware that I tend to celebrate creators and am

suspicious of rulers—our nation’s history began, after all, with the overthrow of a ruler and the creation of a novel form of government. In America, though not at many other times and places in history, innovation is prized more than conservation. The idea that the world’s Creator is also its Ruler—that order accompanies creativity—may strike us as suspicious and unfamiliar.

Yet creativity cannot exist without order—a structure within which creation can happen. On a cosmic level the extraordinary profusion of species could never survive if the world were an undifferentiated soup of elements. This is true of human creativity too. Without the darkened box of a theater, films would lose their compelling power. Without the lines and spaces that make up written English, this book would be a soup of letters. Creativity requires cosmos—it requires an ordered environment.

So in a way the Creator’s greatest gift to his creation is the gift of structure—not a structure which locks the world, let alone the Creator himself, into eternal mechanical repetition, but a structure which provides freedom. And those who are made in his image will also be both creators and rulers. They will have a unique capacity to create—perhaps not to call something out of nothing in quite the way that God does in Genesis 1:1, but to reshape what exists into something genuinely new. And they will have a responsibility to care for what God has made—“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). They will sort out the cultivated from the wild. Human beings will be gardeners.

MAKING SOMETHING OF THE WORLD

This, then, is the picture of humanity we find in Genesis: creative cultivators. We’ll return to the Genesis story in chapter six. But for the moment notice how much it has in common with our other beginnings—the beginnings we have in common with every human being. The man and the woman in the Garden, just like every newborn baby and just like human beings at the dawn of their history—indeed, just like the human beings in the myths that the Genesis story was clearly written to rebut—find themselves already in the midst of a world. We can’t escape the fact that the world came before us.

They also find themselves, as we find ourselves, as human beings always and everywhere have found themselves, sensing that they are in the midst of a story. For the baby, it is the story of her family, a story that will be put together using words like *mama* and *daddy*. For our earliest ancestors, according to the archaeological record, it is the mysterious story of a world with stars and rocks and bison, a world that cries out for explanation.

And God gives the primordial man and woman the same task that the baby almost immediately undertakes with the raw materials of her vocal cords, lungs and mouth—the same thing that our human ancestors did with stone and fire and pigment on cave walls. They go to work with these recalcitrant raw materials (even the Garden before the Fall, it seems, required tilling and keeping), forming and reshaping the world they find themselves in. They begin “making something of the world.”

This phrase, which I have adapted from the Christian cultural critic Ken Myers, distills what culture is and why it matters: *Culture is what we make of the world*. Culture is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it’s given to us and make something else. This is the original insight of the writer of Genesis when he says that human beings were made in God’s image: just like the original Creator, we are creators. God, of course, began with nothing, whereas we begin with something. But the difference is not as great as you might think. For every act of creation involves bringing something into being that was not there before—every creation is *ex nihilo*, from nothing, even when it takes the world as its starting point. Something is added in every act of making. This is clearest in the realm of art, where the raw materials of pigment and canvas become more than you ever could have predicted. Even a five-year-old’s finger painting is more than the sum of paper and paint. But creation, the marvelous making of more than was there before, also happens when a chef makes an omelet, when a carpenter makes a chair, when a toddler makes a snow angel.

Culture is all of these things: paintings (whether finger paintings or the Sistine Chapel), omelets, chairs, snow angels. It is what human beings make of the world. It always bears the stamp of our creativity, our God-given desire to make something more than we were given.

But culture is not just what we make of the world in the first, most obvious sense. Culture also is what we make of the world in a deeper sense of that phrase. When we find ourselves perplexed by a scene in a movie or the lyrics of a song, we say to our friends, “What do you make of that?” We aren’t usually asking our friends to write a new scene or sing new lyrics—we aren’t asking for more creation. We mean, what sense do you make of it? We are asking for interpretation.

Indeed, the world that every baby, every human society and our primordial parents found themselves in clearly needs some interpreting. One of the most striking things about the world is just how little it discloses to us about its true meaning. It is full of mystery—at its best, full of wonder; at its worst, full of terror. Making sense of the wonder and terror of the world is the original human preoccupation. And it is this deeper sense of culture that most clearly distinguishes us from all the rest of creation. Ants and birds and chimpanzees make something of the world, in the sense of reshaping their environment with anthills and nests and even rudimentary tools and techniques—but we simply have no indication that any other creature wonders about the mystery of the world. Making sense of the world, interpreting its wonder and its terror, is left up to human beings alone.

So how do we make sense of the world? The two senses turn out to be more intertwined than we might have thought. We *make sense* of the world by *making something* of the world. The human quest for meaning is played out in human making: the finger-painting, omelet-stirring, chair-crafting, snow-swishing activities of culture. Meaning and making go together—culture, you could say, is the activity of making meaning.

Think about the baby again. As she tries out the infinite combinations of sounds that her tongue and throat and lungs can produce, she happens upon a few that elicit an excited response from her parents. Quite by accident, her tongue bumps against her upper teeth while she vocalizes, making the sound “da.” She does it again, over and over. Her father wanders into the room. “Da.” “Da.” “Da-da.” Suddenly her daddy is leaning close, smiling, exclaiming, picking her up, hugging her. “She said *daddy!*” The baby might not have meant any such thing, but this smiling, hugging, loving man is clearly pleased. The next day, when she’s trying

out vocalizations again, it happens once more. Over the coming weeks the baby begins to connect that sound—“da-da”—with the hugs and the smiles. Perhaps she hears other people making the same sounds and is inspired to make them some more. Over time “da-da” becomes more than just a random and intriguing combination of sounds. The baby has made sense of daddy—given a name to an exceedingly important feature of her world—by making something of the world. Meaning and making have come together.

THE WORLD OF CULTURE

But notice something else about the baby: the world that she must make something of is not just the natural, created world of sound, teeth, lungs and air. Nor is it even just the other creatures, mommy and daddy, that inhabit that world with her. The father’s excitement at hearing “da-da” comes because in our language (and in most other languages, as it happens) that sequence of sounds resembles a word. The existence of that word is itself a part of the world that the baby is trying to make something of. But the word is not “natural”—it is cultural. Culture, not just creation, is part of the baby’s world.

One of the key insights that emerged over several centuries’ worth of study in the fields we now call sociology and anthropology was summed up by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger later expanded on its religious implications in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, which begins, “Every human society is an enterprise of world-building.” Culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact *part of the world* that every new human being has to make something of.

So the baby must make something not just of sounds but of words. Words and language are as inescapable a part of “the world” with which she must work as are lungs and tongues. Omelets and chairs and paintings are just as much a part of the world as eggs and wood and pigments, preexisting and waiting for both interpretation and further creation. The world the baby arrives in encompasses not just the original stuff of pre-human creation but all the myriad things that humans themselves have

already made from that stuff. The world with which the baby will have to come to terms as she grows is just as much cultural as it is natural.

So culture is cumulative: our cultural products become part of the world that a future generation must make something of—in both senses. It's important to appreciate how deep this goes, which is why Berger and Luckmann gave their book the startling title *The Social Construction of Reality*. It is not that nature is somehow deeply real and culture is shadowy, vague or transient. Culture really is part of our world, just as central to our lives and our being human as nature. In some ways it is more central. A baby who is born without hearing may never experience sound or understand the significance of the sounds that he produces by chance with his own vocal tract. But he can survive and even thrive in the world if he is taught language—whether a sign language or a written language—and thus inducted into a culture. The cultural world of language is more essential to human flourishing than the natural world of sound.

THE RIVER AND THE HIGHWAY

Culture has quite literally reshaped the world. In the nineteenth century, if you had asked well-traveled Americans to sketch a map of their country, including its most significant features, they would almost certainly have drawn you a continent full of rivers. The Mississippi, of course, but also the Connecticut, the Ohio, the Missouri, the St. Lawrence and a dozen more. Rivers—part of the created, “uncultured” world—were a crucial part of the world that early Americans had to make something of. And make something of them they did indeed—the rivers, in their dual role as transportation routes for cargo and people on the one hand, and barriers to travel on the other, prompted myriad cultural innovations. Just to name the rivers is to realize that they gave their names to many of the states created as America expanded westward. Cities arose at the juncture of rivers. Technologies were developed to harness the river for transportation. Songs and stories arose that depended on rivers for their setting and meaning—try to imagine *Huckleberry Finn* without Huck and Jim on the barge floating down the Mississippi.

But if you asked similarly well-traveled Americans in the twenty-first century to sketch a map of the continent, I suspect they would have a hard

time identifying any river but the Mississippi. Here's a quick quiz: where on a map is the Missouri River? If you know the answer, you probably either live in St. Louis or have a lifelong obsession with geography. Rivers, so central to the world of the nineteenth century, are now peripheral at best. Interstate highways, on the other hand, are the principal means of travel by land, and most Americans can sketch out the rough lines of Interstate 90, cutting east to west across the continent from Boston to Seattle, and the highway Southern Californians call "the 5," stretching from San Diego to the Pacific Northwest.

Highways are our rivers. Cities arise and economies thrive where they intersect. New forms of commerce flourish alongside the interstate. The extraordinarily complex web of modern intermodal transport, depending on containers that can be transferred seamlessly from ship to rail to truck, depends on the highway system. Songs and stories arise from the highway system too—if nothing quite so romantic and durable as *Huckleberry Finn*, then at least the enduring tradition of the American "road movie" and Jack Kerouac's Beat classic *On the Road*.

The transition from river to highway is a transition from one world to another. We can argue about whether interstate highways make the world better or worse, but we cannot deny that they make a new kind of world. They do so partly by reshaping the physical world itself, blasting through hills and bridging rivers so smoothly that we don't even know the names of the rivers we cross. And they do so more profoundly by reshaping our imagination, our mental picture of what is in the world and what matters in it. The difference they make, however, is not "imaginary"—it is real. It really is possible to drive from Boston to Seattle in fifty hours or less (if you have a partner to drive when you get sleepy). And you can do so without knowing the name of a single river or port. It's possible because of Interstate 90, a purely cultural product, along with the myriad other cultural products that interact with and support it. Culture, not just nature, has become the world that we must make something of.

THE HORIZONS OF THE POSSIBLE

Up to now I've indulged in a risky shortcut: talking about culture in the abstract, almost as if it were an ethereal Big Idea, written with Capital

Letters, floating through History. Yet no one—not even those who read books with titles like *Culture Making*—makes Culture. Rather, Culture, in the abstract, always and only comes from particular human acts of cultivation and creativity. We don't make Culture, we make omelets. We tell stories. We build hospitals. We pass laws. These specific products of cultivating and creating—borrowing a word from archaeology and anthropology, we can call them “artifacts,” or borrowing from philosophy, we can call them “goods”—are what eventually, over time, become part of the framework of the world for future generations.

Likewise, the word *culture*, when it is reserved for art, music, literature and the like, tends to make us think of vague interior states. We think of a beautiful symphony or a provocative work of art in a museum—powerful ideas and images, perhaps, but not artifacts that seem to do anything real, anything tangible, to the world outside the walls where we enjoy or endure them. Yet culture, in its more fundamental sense, really does remake the world, because culture shapes the horizons of the possible.

Think again of that fifty-hour journey from Boston to Seattle. Before the vast, culture-making act that was the construction of Interstate 90, such a journey, in terms of speed and comfort, was impossible. Now it is possible. What made the difference was a concrete cultural good—in this case, quite literally made of concrete. Of course, most of us are too impatient to drive across the country, so if we can afford it, we avail ourselves of an even more audacious kind of culture—air travel—and cover the distance in a few hours. What was previously impossible, culture has made possible.

And even more remarkably, culture can make some things impossible that were previously possible. Reading David McCullough's biography of John Adams a few years ago, I was reminded that not that long ago, a vast cultural infrastructure made it possible to travel the three hundred miles from Boston to Philadelphia by horse. There were roads, wayside inns, stables and turnpikes along which travelers could make a slow but steady journey from one city to the other. For more than a century these cultural goods made interstate horse travel possible. But I dare say it would be impossible now. The inns and stables of the nineteenth century are long gone. Horses are forbidden from the shoulders of the highways that con-

nect Boston and Philadelphia, even if horses could stand the roar of the traffic that would be rushing by them just a few feet away. To ride a horse any distance in what is now called “the Northeast Corridor” would be a feat of bravery, to say the least, and quite possibly also an act of cruelty to animals. Culture has made travel by horse, once eminently possible, impossible.

And these two functions—making things possible that were impossible, and perhaps even more importantly making things impossible that were once possible—when put together add up to “world-building.” *World*, after all, is a shorthand way of describing all those forces outside ourselves, beyond our control and will, that both constrain us and give us options and opportunities. After many thousands of years of accumulating human culture, the world which we must make something of—the environment in which we carry on the never-ending human cultural project—is largely the world others before us have made. Culture, even more than nature, defines for us the horizons of possibility and impossibility. We live in the world that culture has made.

DIAGNOSING CULTURE

If we want to understand culture, then, it’s always best to begin and end with specific cultural goods. I’ve found five questions to be particularly helpful in understanding how a particular artifact fits into its broader cultural story.

The first two questions arise from culture’s meaning-making function—culture’s role in making sense of the world. (1) *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world is?* What are the key features of the world that this cultural artifact tries to deal with, respond to, make sense of? (2) *What does this cultural artifact assume about the way the world should be?* What vision of the future animated its creators? What new sense does it seek to add to a world that often seems chaotic and senseless?

Then come two questions that acknowledge culture’s extraordinary power to shape the horizons of possibility. (3) *What does this cultural artifact make possible?* What can people do or imagine, thanks to this artifact, that they could not before? Conversely, (4) *what does this cultural artifact make impossible (or at least very difficult)?* What activities and experiences

that were previously part of the human experience become all but impossible in the wake of this new thing? Often this is the most interesting question of all, especially because so much technological culture is presented exclusively in terms of what it will make *possible*. Yet few cultural artifacts serve only to move the horizons of possibility outward and leave the horizons of impossibility unchanged. Almost every cultural artifact, in small or large ways, makes something impossible—or at least more difficult—that was possible before.

Finally, because culture inevitably begets more culture, we have to look at the effect of this artifact on future culture. (5) *What new forms of culture are created in response to this artifact?* What is cultivated and created that could not have been before?

To be sure, these five questions may yield more interesting answers with some cultural artifacts than others. *What do omelets assume about the world?* may not seem to be the kind of question you'd want to spend much time on. Then again, even to answer that question is to remind ourselves just how much culture is part of the "world" we must make something of—since omelets assume that the world includes not just the natural phenomena called eggs (obtained from chickens that have been domesticated through millennia in order to produce reliably large, tasty eggs for human consumption) but cultural phenomena, including a ready source of high heat, nonstick or well-seasoned frying pans, natural ingredients like peppers or mushrooms and processed ingredients like cheese or ham, a meal called breakfast where eggs figure prominently, utensils that are well suited to eating a large mass of eggs, and hearty appetites that are inclined to consume several eggs in a sitting. Just for starters.

What do omelets assume about the way the world should be? Well, I suppose they assume that the tasty, protein-laden nutrients of an egg are better eaten cooked than raw—and perhaps also that the world should have an alternative to the blandness of plain cooked eggs. The world should be multicolored, with green peppers and pink ham and white cheese contrasting pleasingly with the pale yellow eggs; the world should have many textures, both crunchy and smooth. The world should hold together—a haphazard pile of scrambled eggs is antithetical to the vision of the well-turned-out omelet, semicircular and perfectly bronzed. The world should

be filling, satisfying, rich in the mouth, large on the plate—an overflow of plenitude from the small, unremarkable beginning of an egg (or three). Life, or at least breakfast, should leave us stuffed.

Perhaps there is more here than we realized. Even a simple breakfast dish encodes a whole set of assumptions and hopes about the world, which we could summarize this way: the world has eggs, but it should have omelets too. The world, the cultural artifact of the omelet says, always has room for more. The givens of our natural environment, as satisfying and nutritious as they are, are nothing compared to what can happen with a little culture—or, in the case of the omelet, centuries and centuries of gradual perfecting of all the cultural ingredients, from cheese to frying pans, that make the omelet possible. Culture fulfills the latent promise of nature. To echo biblical language, the egg is good, but the omelet is very good—but now we’re really getting ahead of ourselves.

What does the omelet make possible? To balance out our meditations on the glories of omelets, perhaps we should engage in a bit of culinary realpolitik. The omelet, fully cooked as it is, helps make it possible for salmonella to contaminate our egg supply without causing a public health disaster. For that matter, the omelet, generally a good source of cholesterol, saturated fat and sodium, might make heart disease possible, or a lot more likely, for many of its satisfied customers. It also may contribute to the fortunes of the egg industry and the wallets of egg industrialists. *What does the omelet make impossible, or at least a lot more difficult?* Perhaps the omelet doesn’t make anything truly impossible, though you may be able to think of something I haven’t. It certainly makes eating raw eggs—not unknown in human history—a lot less appealing. It may even make plain old scrambled eggs seem rather second rate. It makes it harder to sit down to a “continental” breakfast of bread, butter and jam, and feel fully satisfied. It makes it harder to pay for breakfast at a restaurant, in many American cities at any rate, without getting into double digits. It may make it harder for many of us to stay thin.

What new culture is created in response to the omelet? New kinds of omelets—omelets with egg whites only (a response to the original omelet’s deficiencies for cholesterol watchers) and omelets with new combinations of ingredients. New kinds of kitchen implements—better surfaces for ex-

ecuting the all-important omelet flip, pan sizes suited to creating the perfect omelet half-moon shape. The “omelet station” in fancy hotel restaurants, staffed by a chef whose only job is to make omelets to order. Books about omelet preparation. Websites (or at least sections of egg websites) about omelets. And these very paragraphs in this book, themselves a small cultural artifact seeking to “make something of” omelets and the world they make.

THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

As fascinating, and revealing, as these questions may be when applied to omelets, they are even more helpful when we try to understand large-scale cultural goods like the interstate highway system, established when President Dwight Eisenhower signed into law the “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act” on June 29, 1956. Encoded into its very beginnings was America’s preoccupation with being prepared to meet the military threat from the Soviet Union. Eisenhower had been impressed by Germany’s autobahn system while serving there in the United States Army—so that the interstate highway system’s origins, like so many other cultural artifacts in post-World War II America, were shaped by the experiences and values of military men, many of which can be discerned in our answers to our diagnostic questions.

What does the interstate highway assume about the way the world is? Of course it assumes the existence of the automobile, which in turn assumes combustion engines and combustible fuel—so that the interstate highway system depends on other exceedingly complex cultural artifacts for its existence. It assumes the political unification of relatively distant places, the modern nation-state that stretches from “sea to shining sea,” so different from the arrangements of an earlier time when each valley could be a kingdom. It assumes millennia of accumulated experience in road building, reaching back at least to the Romans’ engineering achievements that made possible their own far-flung empire. The highway system also assumes a preexisting map of significant cities, most of which will be incorporated into its grid (thus reinforcing the viability of the cities it passes through, while sidelining those it passes by). It assumes significant national wealth that provides the capacity to invest in such a massive project,

and it assumes the population pressures and economic growth that have produced that wealth.

What does it assume about the way the world should be? The world should be smoother and faster, and the world should be safer—its corners, hills and valleys literally rounded off in the interests of efficiency. Rivers and mountains should be scenery, not obstacles. The perceived distance from one place to the next should shrink—the mile should seem like a short distance rather than a long one. Consistency from place to place is more valuable than the particulars of each place—uniform signage and road markings, fixed radii for curves and angles for exit ramps, and identical rules of the road should make local knowledge unnecessary. We should be able to go anywhere and feel more or less at home. Goods from far away should become more economically competitive with goods from nearby; goods nearby should have new markets in places far away.

What does the interstate highway system make possible? If you are reading this in the United States, it is overwhelmingly likely that everything you can touch nearby—your clothes, the chair, the coffee you're sipping or the food you're eating—traveled at some point by interstate, more cheaply and more quickly than it would have otherwise. So the interstates have indeed made smooth and efficient commerce more possible. The interstates also spawned entirely new forms of commerce—from fast-food restaurants to Cracker Barrel, that paradoxical restaurant chain that reveres “old country cooking” and inhabits apparently time-weathered old buildings, but is in fact only available next to interstate highways. They helped make America's car culture not only possible but, in most parts of the country, necessary. We wouldn't have green-lawned suburbs without the interstates that made it possible to live far from workplaces in central cities. And without the interstates we wouldn't have the abandoned-lot “inner cities,” created when middle-class families moved to the suburbs. In fact, when the Fannie Mae Foundation asked urban planners to name the top ten factors in the way American cities developed (and decayed) in the twentieth century, the interstate highway system was number one.

So the interstate highway system has also made some things impossible, or at least much more difficult. It has become more difficult for many Americans to work without commuting. It has become impossible to sus-

tain economic growth without reasonably priced oil—an impossibility that becomes more ominous the more oil we use. In many small towns that were bypassed by the interstates, vibrant commercial life has become impossible; even as in cities that were at the intersection of major interstates (like Atlanta), vibrant commercial growth has become more possible, and new forms of culture have arisen at otherwise forsaken highway exits.

And yet the story of interstate highway culture, and the broader automotive culture it enables, is not over. *What new culture is being created in response?* A Toyota Prius hatchback owned by the nonprofit organization PhillyCarShare has a permanent parking space a few blocks from my home. PhillyCarShare's executive director, Tanya Seaman, was working as a city planner when she and a few friends conceived the vision of hundreds of cars parked in convenient locations around the city, freeing many residents of both central and suburban Philadelphia from the need to own their own cars. The organization, which was operating in the black with a \$10 million budget in 2007, has grown to thirty thousand members and over four hundred cars. City planners estimate that each shared car makes it possible for up to twenty-five people to forego buying a private car of their own—so there are perhaps ten thousand fewer vehicles crammed onto Philadelphia's streets and highways in 2007 than when the organization was founded in 2002. PhillyCarShare would never have been necessary before the interstate highway system changed the horizons of metropolitan Philadelphia—but its creative and sustainable solution to urban driving would never have been possible either.

CULTURE IS NOT OPTIONAL

So this is what culture does: it defines the horizons of the possible and the impossible in very concrete, tangible ways. I don't just believe in fast and convenient travel by highway; I don't just value it; it isn't just something I can imagine that I couldn't imagine before. It is something I can actually do. And the only reason I can do it is because someone (President Eisenhower, the members of the United States Congress, and untold numbers of civil engineers, road builders, zoning commission members and accountants) created something that wasn't there before.

And, for that matter, I might believe that we'd be better off if we didn't

spend eighty-one minutes a day in our cars (the American average, according to the *Wall Street Journal*), that the days of horse travel were actually better for people and animals, and that the rapid consumption of our planet's limited supply of fossil fuels is both greedy and foolish. But it's impossible for me to live as if the highways don't exist. And, again, those impossibilities are there, whether I like it or not, because someone created something that wasn't there before. Surely interstate highways have removed many appealing possibilities from American life, from viable Main Streets to travel by horse (though both may be more appealing from a safe historical distance than they were up close).

But however constricting culture's horizons of impossibility may seem, culture is indispensable for any human possibility. Culture is the realm of human freedom—its constraints and impossibilities are the boundaries within which we can create and innovate. This is clearly true of a cultural artifact like this book: when I write about omelets for a North American audience, I can expect that nearly every reader will know what an omelet is, and most will have eaten one. I can be all but certain that anyone who purchases this book will have driven on an interstate highway. (This book itself, the physical object, almost certainly traveled on an interstate highway on its way to you, and as an author I rely on that too.) But even if my book finds its way to an omelet-innocent, interstate-free corner of the world, I can be absolutely sure that we share the cultural heritage of spoken and written language. Because of language, interstates and even omelets, we are able to engage in a conversation that would be impossible otherwise. To whatever extent you have been engaged by, enlightened by or even confused by the content of this chapter, culture has made that possible. Indeed, without culture, literally nothing would be possible for human beings. To say that culture creates the horizons of possibility is to speak literal, not just figurative or metaphorical, truth.

This truth is embedded in the Genesis story of beginnings. Not only does God himself function as both Creator and Ruler, breather of possibilities and setter of limits, he intends the same for those who are made in his image. Without the task of gardening—cultivating, tending, ruling and creating using the bountiful raw material of nature—the woman and man would have had nothing to do, nothing to be. Whatever distortions

may arise as the man and the woman carry out their cultural task (and as we know from experience and will see in part two, the distortions are grave indeed), culture begins, just as human beings begin, in the realm of created blessing. The beginning of culture and the beginning of humanity are one and the same because culture is what we were made to do.

There is no withdrawing from culture. Culture is inescapable. And that's a good thing.

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