

Our Fallen State: Part Two

By Carl Nelson

Ethos and the Role of Discipline in Parallel Cultures

"Dying societies accumulate laws like dying men accumulate remedies." – Nicolas Gomez Davila



I was making a regular visit to the gym today, and realized that there was more to be praised about regular workouts than the physical benefits accrued. In today's topsy turvy, audience/meme/group-driven, godless world there still exist enclaves which practice the values and adhere to the social rules of a former era. When I visit the Camden Clark Heath and Wellness Center across the Ohio River and five minutes from my home to swim my half-mile, and practice my balance and flexibility routines, I enter such a balkanized ethos. People chat nonchalantly, share opinions calmly, find a little bit more about each other and catch up on friends they have in common. Politeness reigns. Respect is given. There seems to exist a shared common ethos, which involves an admiration of

discipline: the work now-play later logos of the self-determined life.

There is competitive looking fellow who is changing a couple lockers away, appears vigorous, bright and about a third my age. Nevertheless, he nods his respects when I appear. I'm old, a bit paunchy, but I show regularly. We treat each other politely, offer common acknowledgement, and then go about our business. I don't feel disrespected, though it's apparent I could never best him in any gym contest – and that he's more than likely gainfully employed and vigorous contributor to the community well-being, while I am more of a thoughtful also-ran, a retired has-been. What is key is that we both attend to a shared collegiality. We're all at some stage of participating in the discipline of physical activity. That's why everybody is here, including the morbidly obese, the crippled, the mentally confused, the cellulite/crepe skin afflicted, even the kids – all sharing and/or learning to share in the ethos of self-discipline and the active life. The rules abide and seldom need verbal enforcing. Politeness tends to rule behavior. A "you first" solicitude prevails.

Ever since writing Part One of this two part essay – which involved combating organizational careerism, and how it seemed to involve preserving a strong institutional ethos – I've been reflecting lately on what exactly determines an ethos, and finding that it seems to circle around the word 'discipline'. Religious groups have been realizing lately that without it they really haven't anything; that they have been sold a bill of goods in asserting their relevance by blending themselves within the common culture. They have blended themselves right away...

Two cases come to mind in which just the opposite seems to have occurred. In one case, very strict traditional Hasidic culture seems to have endured, even flourished in places where the more reformed Jews have evaporated off into the non-Jewish milieu, where they circulate more as an ethnic description

than as religious observers. Personally, many of the non-observant Jews I've known had oddly had taken up Buddhism, Zen meditation, or other life-style philosophies.

As a second case, over the past several years I have heard that the Amish have been buying up farmland in the Southeastern area of Ohio where I live, so as to incubate another satellite community due to their flourishing up north. Moreover, I was surprised to learn from an acquaintance that it was not the less radical Mennonites who gradually drifted away and split from the stricter demands of separation and simplicity of the Amish – but rather that it was the other way around. And it has been these more conservative of the Amish who have prospered and grown the tightly knit communities hereabouts – while the Mennonites seem to perform on the periphery, as go-betweens who over time seem to have evaporated into the prevailing community.

When I think about the lost American ethos we are experiencing evermore daily, it seems that there is this same dynamic at work. As Americans lose self-discipline, increasingly more laws and regulations are supplied in order to stay societal order. Unfortunately, the more dependent and juvenile the population is treated, the less opportunity for training in the ways of self-discipline is available

. Observe how uncommon it is among the ear-piece afflicted youth to offer their seat to the elderly, the infirm or the pregnant on a public conveyance. But it is difficult to instill self-discipline in the youth. I am a reluctant to even strike up a conversation with a neighborhood kid, much less correct their behavior for fear of retribution. More and more, the rules of engagement with children are supplied and exercised by official, authorized numeraries: teachers, counselors, lawyers, social workers, etc. Even parents are told how the sex of their child is defined.

Forbidding public mandates shout in bold block letters on

signage in nearly all public areas. It's as if people of yore didn't need to be told what to do; whereas nowadays the citizenry are thought not able to get along without all the helpful threats. The truth in the epigram leading this essay is playing out: "*Dying societies accumulate laws like dying men accumulate remedies.*" The only time our government can seemingly stand down, is when we are being criminally attacked. They will however prosecute those who practice self-defense.

The decay cries out in increasing numbers for the "help" the government is purportedly there to offer; purportedly *should* offer. Nowhere are the citizens incentivized towards self-discipline. The undisciplined clamor for release from all restraints at the same time as demanding coercive restrictions be placed upon all those others – especially those who have acquired self-discipline and the rewards which accrue. The unruly note there is no equity. And therefore, the majority of unruly dictate that the benefits of this self-discipline needs be re-distributed – again by coercive measures. Crap dictates like this generate no ethos, but they generate despair very well – which generates the need for more severe strictures with which to contain the clamor. Whatever ethos remains from this relentless process looks very much like chaos.

Re-distribution is hard-pressed when it comes to general health and physical fitness – which is probably a big reason why my local Health and Wellness Center is a balkanized free state amidst the cultural wars raging about. How long the powers that be will allow such islands of self-discipline to exist is surely a question as their presence is a contradiction to most of the 'necessities' the State insists must be supplied.

Taste is another thing which it is hard to re-appropriate and to re-distribute, and so segments of balkanized culture also flourish in small detached communities of shared preference I like country music and met my wife in a country music dance

hall overlooking a bend in Tukwila, Washington's Green River. The place crackled with sexual energy.

Inside however, a cowboy-way, gentlemanly conduct was adhered to. When trouble arose, (that is, when the self-discipline broke down) it was "taken outside" for a quick schoolyard remedial recap. All ages, (short of children), were represented. The dancing was two-step, and then rose in greater complexity. An hour of lessons was offered prior to the band starting. Line dancing was a crowd pleaser, fun for both the participant and the spectator. And a good dancer could stay very busy.

My wife recalls especially enjoying this one very overweight fellow who she said, moved like a dream. "Twirling around him was like orbiting a small moon," she recalls, smiling, and chatting about how she would bounce off his mid-drift. The shirts were snazzy and pressed; the jeans new, the boots embroidered and polished. In short, there was discipline to the dress, discipline to the dances, discipline to the codes of civility, and discipline to the music which celebrated all the stages of a disciplined life.

All of which generated a very thick ethos, and a hard one to ignore or dislodge. There was no doubt about where you were in this social universe (in case all of the trucks parked outside in the potholed gravel lot didn't give you a clue). And if you kept your nose clean, all went very well. No one really had to tell you this. (But they would take you outside, if further instruction were needed.)

[Part 1 here](#)