

The Fabric of Society

We live out lives not as simple individuals, but in a highly complex society. For any society to exist and survive there must be rules of membership. Take a moment and think about various societies that we know something of. Think about all those nature shows from the plains of the Serengeti. The lion prides, the various dog packs, even the birds and the bees have rules. They all have rules that each must follow if their society is to survive.

The society of man is much more complex than that of any other society. We have a myriad of rules and regulations that we must follow. Many of them are written down and we call them laws. Thousands of laws. Across the world, literally millions of them. But for every written law, there are dozens or hundreds of unwritten rules that we must follow. Most of them are not really considered rules, but they are just the same.

Think about what a smile means, and what a frown means. What if I were to decide to reverse the two meanings. To declare that when I am angry I will smile, and when I am happy I will frown. Aside from the absurdity of this, think of how well I would survive in this society. If I were actually able to accomplish this action, I would be mistrusted, disliked and very quickly ostracized. We could carry on this conversation, but the point to be made is that we have rules about facial expressions. We have rules about vocal intonations, hand gestures, how close we stand, how we look at people. Indeed, when we stop to think about it, we really have rules about how we conduct every single aspect of our lives.

These rules are what make up or society. They provide us a framework in which we can exist together. From these rules we have a very good idea of what to expect from our neighbors. These rules are both rigid and flexible.

I think of these rules as the fabric of society. The threads of a fabric are the rules by which a material becomes clothing. Instead of a mass of hairs or unorganized threads, they hold each other in order and become a larger whole. The threads of a sweater must all work together to keep in the warmth and keep out the cold. The rules of our society are the rules by which we can feel comfortable in close confinement with our neighbors.

When we abuse the fabric of our clothing, it will eventually fail to serve us as intended. In a like manner, when we abuse the rules of society, it will no longer serve us. Our society will tend to break down into chaos. The comparison of the rules to society to the fabric of our clothes can lead to some enlightening comparisons.

Let us compare the fabric of society to the fabric of our clothing. Presume that I acquire a nice thick well-made cardigan sweater and begin wearing it daily. It looks quite nice and keeps me warm. Treated well, it will last and serve me for many years.

Instead of treating it well, I get a microscope, a small pair of scissors and find a tiny thread to cut. Just one. When I put the sweater on, no one notices the cut thread. So I cut another one. Just one. Again, no one notices. Even on close inspection, I cannot see a difference.

Let's accelerate this and pretend I have built a very tiny robot with tiny scissors. This robot will move randomly about the sweater and cut one tiny thread every few minutes. Each cut will be of the smallest thread that exists. Remember, large threads are but small ones bundled together.

As the robot begins its work, no one will notice any difference in the sweater. But eventually, the sweater will begin to look a bit ragged. Maybe nothing significant, just not as good as it once was.

Eventually it will begin to look down right ratty. Do you think we would be able to define that one point in time? The point where we look at the sweater and declare it nice, then a minute later we declare it not quite nice any more? Will any one be able to detect that point? And where do we cross that point between a very nice sweater and one that just doesn't rate as very nice?

As time marches on my once fine sweater will continue to degrade. Every day it will look a little worse, it will let a little more warmth out and a little more cold in. Finally at some point in time, my sweater will simply fall apart. Let's imagine that I sneeze and this poor ragged collection of threads falls off my shoulders and around my feet in a small pile of ragged threads and dust.

Did the sneeze cause the destruction of my sweater? Not really, it was the culminating event, but not the cause. What about that last snip of the robot's scissors just before I sneezed? Did that cause the sweater to fall apart? What about the very first snip? There was no defining single event that destroyed the sweater. Each tiny snip added its little bit to the final destruction.

So it is with society. All social animals live by a set of rules. Humans, gorillas, chimpanzees, bees, even ants live by societal rules. If the members of the society fail to live up to the rules, the society decays.

A bee colony will survive if a single worker refuses to go out and get pollen from the flowers. If two, three, or four workers neglect their chores, the hive will survive. But if the trend continues, eventually the hive will starve to death.

Our society will continue to flourish if I insult you. And if you insult me back, few will notice it. But what happens when more and more begin to violate our rules of society. We become disrespectful to each other. We leave our trash along the side of the road. Throw our cigarette butts out on the street. We run yellow lights, then red lights. We consistently speed, then complain that everyone speeds so why should I drive at or below the limit. When someone cuts us off, we chase them down and cut them off. Then flip them the bird. Yeah, that'll teach 'em.

The decay will continue, a little at a time. Sometime before complete collapse, we will begin shooting people for small insults. At some point, our teenagers will pick up on this and begin shooting each other.

What was the cause? The two students in Colorado certainly didn't go on a rampage because you and I traded insults and left our cigarette butts lying in the street. Just like that sweater that didn't fall apart because I cut that first thread.

The true fabric of our society is made up of the innumerable small acts that each of us perform every day in our lives. As a whole, our society is in a state of significant disrepair. Look at the kind of entertainment we ask for. Our movies have the consistent theme of more and grander brutality. Our video games are even worse. We work so hard at electing politicians that tell us what we want to hear, not what we need to hear. Then we blame them for doing a poor job. We excoriate them for doing what it takes to get elected. And somehow, we forget that these are the people that make the written rules of our society. We forget that we did have a choice, and these are the choices we made.

On the other hand, there is good news. Society is unlike a sweater. Society can be repaired. Each and every kind act does something to improve society. Each moral decision and action works to strengthen society. Our children don't need quality time, they need real time, clock time, hours spent showing them, as opposed to telling them, that they are important. Showing them, not telling them how to behave in society. Days and years spent demonstrating them the behaviors they need to learn. They need the discipline that they are too young to provide for themselves.

Our neighborhoods need those little acts of kindness. Slow your car down as you approach your house. Take a walk and pick up those little bits of trash on the streets where you live. Walk out of your way to say hello to your neighbor and chat a bit.

Each act of kindness or generosity knits helps to repair the tears in the fabric of our society. It is our behavior that keeps the fabric of society in good repair and functioning for the future. Not government, not the other guy; my behavior, your behavior. It is up to us. It is up to you.