

Editors

Annalee R. Ward, Executive Editor
Mary Bryant, Managing Editor

Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education
University of Dubuque
2000 University Avenue
Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)
563-589-3243 (fax)
wendt@dbq.edu (email)
www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

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Localized Character: Building Community and Modeling Authenticity and Integrity

Andrew Jones

Abstract

Globalization has placed the souls of our cities in jeopardy. However, by embracing the ideas and practices of the “local” movement, we can begin to develop character by strengthening our communities as places to model authenticity and integrity.

It’s a common question of introduction: “So, where are you from?” The response is meant to distinguish something about the respondent or to elicit some familiarity. This small slice of information is meant to reveal insight into one’s personality, beliefs, or character. But as towns across America have grown increasingly similar with suburban layouts centered around large retail centers, the value of the question has diminished. But wouldn’t it be great if one could rely on the simple mention of a town’s name as a strong indicator of the true types of residents or the values that community holds dear?

Since the emergence of online retailers and the expansion of big-box stores and chains into a greater number of communities (and countries), many researchers have examined and questioned the effects that this

type of consumer globalization might have on cultures, identities, and the environment. These wide-ranging sources have touched on the problems that consumer globalization pose for diet and sustainability, democracy, quality of life, and personal responsibility, among others (Featherstone; Beck et al.; Monbiot; Scriven; Walsh). Regardless of the specific focus, these writers have all expressed concerns about the negative impacts on values and virtues in exchange for economic prosperity and growth within a larger societal context.

The problem with the proliferation of globalization and consumerism is that we have begun to lose the souls of our homes—the regions and communities that help to anchor our sense of place and identity. In their book, *Beyond Homelessness*, Christian scholars Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh argue that “global capitalism is a homeless-making force in the lives of millions upon millions of people” (263). They devote a whole chapter to the concept of postmodern homelessness centered around the shift of modern Western individuals away from connectedness toward a consuming, detached, uncommitted, and rootless existence (252).



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But there is more to this “homeless-making force” than the mere impact on economic well-being. Global capitalism affects moral character, empathy, and autonomy. “The power of this ideology . . . is not narrowly economic in nature but is a crisis of culture and an erosion of the values that might shape the public good” (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 106). Indeed, the ability of a place to define and model its own moral character is threatened by global capitalism. In many ways, we are trending toward replacing our specific community values with imported versions created in corporate boardrooms instead of through discourse, interaction, and coherence at the community level.

By continuing to enable the reach of global corporations into more markets with our consumer habits, we only enhance the speed with which we are losing the stories and virtues of our communities. If we fail

to surround ourselves with businesses and spaces that have ties to our community, we begin to lose the sense of what makes our hometowns unique and good, and what they might aspire to be in the future. We



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run into the danger of replacing specific representations of ideals that our communities hold dear with corporate designed, produced, and mandated versions. This essay will explore ways we can nurture our local virtues by embracing local businesses and spaces as places that build community and model authenticity and integrity.

Problems of Globalization and Consumerism

Consumer globalization has detrimental effects on cities and regions. Globalization has continued to fuel urban sprawl in modern America through retail expansion for national chain stores. These chain stores and large retailers often prompt the development of strip malls on the edges of cities, only to leave the buildings vacant within a handful of years after the businesses close, go bankrupt, or move again to newer, more advantageous locations. While local businesses may also have short lifespans, they tend to give back more to the community (Leinbach-Reyhle; Mitchell, “Key Studies”). However, large, corporate chains often sign restrictive leases on enormous new retail spaces “that prohibit competitors from moving in there, so [the former chain] is willing to pay on an empty building for a long time” (Associated Press). In an article from *USA Today* titled “Closed Big-box Stores Create Retail Eyesore in Many Cities,” J.C. Reindl highlights the prevalence of empty retail spaces formerly occupied by large chains failing in finding new tenants and quotes one big-box real estate broker as saying, “[T]hey may just sit there and eventually get torn down.” This trend fuels blight within our communities and visually promotes a modern, “throwaway” culture that doesn’t seem to value sustainability or integrity in relationship to place.

In addition, a roundup of research on the impact of big-box retailers published in *Journalist's Resource* noted that the arrival of such stores “was associated with increased obesity of area residents, higher crime rates relative to communities that were not by stores, lower overall employment at the county level, and lower per-acre tax revenues than mixed-use development” (Ordway and Kille). The article goes on to note that despite the known negatives, cities continue to offer incentives to entice retail and restaurant chains.

Local businesses do not have the benefit of many of the resources that global corporations do and many find it challenging to compete. In their academic research, sociologist Amory Starr and political scientist Jason Adams note that “local producers and retailers find their established local markets invaded by international competitors with massive advertising budgets, economies of scale, brand recognition, capital, and expensive product research and development” (23). The Institute for Local Self-Reliance notes that “11,000 independent pharmacies have closed since 1990. Independent bookstores have fallen from 58 percent of book sales in 1972 to just 17 percent today. Local hardware dealers are on the decline, while two companies have captured 30 percent of the market” (Mitchell, “Impact of Chain Stores on Communities”).

This decline in independently-owned and -operated businesses in these fields has been coupled with the corporate entities replacing them, trading in long-term jobs for short-term, part-time labor that is viewed as disposable or replaceable if corporate ideology, goals, or management happens to change.

All of these byproducts of globalization undercut the autonomy of local regions and communities. Disposable buildings, workers, and resources slowly affect the hope and optimism of residents for the future of their town, their region, and even themselves. Corporate waste and blight erodes the narrative of a place and people. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh contend,

virtues are story-shaped, praiseworthy character traits formed by choices over time that dispose us to act consistent with our most deeply grounded narrative. We know what is truly good and how to

live well by looking to people of virtue as role models and by drinking in certain narratives in particular communities. (211)

It follows then that communities could benefit from focusing on futures that attempt to re-establish their own narrative and autonomy, in response to effects of global corporations and consumerism. Starr and Adams note, “Localities independent of global prices and transport are thereby independent of fads, planned obsolescence, production priorities, and technologies originating elsewhere. Economic priorities are determined by the affected community” (38). Community becomes the key defense by shaping and emphasizing its own priorities. Building community through businesses and spaces creates a foundation where moral character can be defined and modeled.

Building Community

The success of many local businesses centers on their ability to create community, foster discourse, and model ethical and moral behaviors. In this manner, they craft their own narrative. When a longstanding business shuts its doors or sees the retirement of its owners, we often see a community outpouring of nostalgic sentiment. Local newspapers print stories recounting the company’s history, the owner’s impact on the community, or community member accounts of fond memories shopping or working with the company. They view the business as an authentic and integral part of their sense of place. Many community members see this independent business as an extension of themselves. As Brandeis University Associate Professor of Sociology Laura J. Miller notes, “the bookstore that reflects the particularities of its community is seen as a bulwark against homogenization” (396). It may not even be homogenization that is of concern as much as the community’s right to autonomy surrounding its moral character. The community’s autonomy rests on its ability to be authentic in its desires, considerations, and undertakings. This need for autonomy, in turn, reaffirms the efforts of communal spaces to combat the postmodern homelessness that global corporations and chains foment.

Support for local businesses has seen an increased push in recent years. As a way to counter Black Friday (and now Thursday, too), the U.S. Small Business Administration is promoting “Small Business Saturday” (“Small

Business Saturday”). This event looks to ride the wave of post-Thanksgiving consumer spending, but unlike Black Friday the emphasis is on spending money that will directly benefit businesses in the local community.¹ In addition to Small Business Saturday, the slogan “Shop Local” has morphed into various versions: Drink Local. Eat Local. Read Local. Make Local. Participation by more and more local businesses and local patrons suggests that there is indeed a desire for autonomy in communities and that embracing the idea of “local” can begin to shape unique boundaries for the community. Another part of the “local” movement ripe for support is the community space that serves as a haven for serious discourse, challenging ideas, and artistic expression.



Small Business Saturday supports businesses in the local community.

Communal spaces are important parts of how a city or region defines its moral dimensions. In their book, *Character, Choices & Community*, Russell B. Connors Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick state that “This *moral* dimension of our experience is extremely important. For morality is concerned with our struggle to become and be *fully human persons and communities*” (8). Additionally, Bouma-Prediger and Walsh state that “we need a richer, deeper, and thicker habitus, a worldview rooted in narrative that engenders a culture of hospitality and justice” (112). It would be a mistake to allow ourselves to become lost in the generic and commercial, simply empty residents passing our lives without an awareness or understanding of feeling rooted to a place. This habitus can be formed through community interaction in public spaces. In these shared spaces, community members and citizens enter into dialogue that has situated meaning, shared memory, and ethical implications.

Community is situated around the idea of dwelling—or it ought to be. Individuals need to regain their sense of “dwelling” within their communities. In his theoretical writings related to rootedness, Tim Ingold has emphasized a need to “regain that original perspective . . . [to] understand how the activities of building—of cultivation and construction—belong to our dwelling in the world, to the way we are”

(185-186). In this regard, we need to identify and develop the ways in which place will shape moral character. This idea requires us to be builders of not just structures, but of community and character. As Bouma-Prediger and Walsh offer, “habitual patterns of behavior and ways of looking at the world are rooted in societally shaped and shared dispositions, values, and orientations” (107). With this in mind, we can begin to make concerted efforts to amplify the character of our communities. Unique, local spaces help us provide examples of the characteristics that make our places autonomous—that make them homes we are proud of.

Modeling Authenticity and Integrity

An important reason for encouraging the presence of, and support for, local entrepreneurs, and building spaces of community interaction, is the creation of a sense of place rooted in authenticity and integrity. In order to create a place rooted in authenticity and integrity, communities must model both.

But what do I mean by authenticity? In this case, I am not advocating for an expression of excessive individualism or embracing egoism. Instead, I’m proposing an authenticity that promotes human flourishing in relationship with social coherence and responsibility. In this sense, I’m advocating for models of *relational authenticity*, as influenced by social scientist Charles Taylor and defined by Natalie Fletcher, philosopher at Université Laval in Montreal, as “a moral attitude that strives to capture the genuine way that individual selves connect with the world around them—people, other living things, nature” (87). Fletcher’s ethical conception of relational authenticity emphasizes increasing coherence and connections among members of the community and to the natural world, while encouraging individuals to become flourishing, better versions of themselves.

Craig Dunn, Professor of Business and Sustainability at Western Washington University, has provided a valuable overview of the theoretical construction of integrity, as well as a definition of integrity. Dunn states that “integrity requires coherence among a set of moral values . . . consisten[t] with a set of social values, and that integrity further requires congruence between [a person’s] behavior and the set

of moral/social values over time and across social context(s)” (109). Local communities benefit from the integrity of local businesses and spaces because they can influence the moral/social values through interactions and purchases. Integrity adds the elements of consistency, time, and broad social contexts to authenticity. In fact, Dunn refers to integrity as a “macro formulation” of moral character. Integrity links disparate parts of moral character in a consistent, coherent set of actions and beliefs that spans past and present.

I believe these concepts of authenticity and integrity can be modeled through local establishments such as bookstores, record stores,² and farmers markets.³

Local, independent bookstores strive to offer events and build relationships that emphasize authenticity and foster community. One example is the frequent hosting of author readings. While many of the readings feature national writers, a strong number of them are readings by local authors. By hosting readings with local writers, the independent bookstore offers a public space for community voices and a chance for a



Author readings offer public spaces for community voices.

local audience to experience important cultural contributions that are relevant and reflective of the region. This is an important part of what James R. Skouge and Kavita Rao, professors of education, note as “help[ing] in the dissemination of what is distinctive in the lives of people and their communities” (54). These readings offer members of the community an opportunity to be reflective, not only regarding the self, but also regarding elements of human history. As Fletcher notes, such experiences with authenticity can allow people “to understand that they are not the origins of their full identities” (89). These events reinforce long-standing ideas, history, and experiences shared by the community.

While everyone loves the ability to find nearly any book and have it delivered to their door in two days, the biggest loss associated with online bookstores is the communal aspect that a local, independent

bookstore fosters. Instead of communicating with a knowledgeable employee who might make informed recommendations, users scroll through lists of sellers searching for the cheapest option, shipping included. Online retailers allow individuals to be inconsistent in using their purchasing power. They provide individuals with a shield to hide behind which can mask whether their actions are supporting the values they espouse. For instance, if an individual claims to support authors of color but then purchases books only by white males, the package that arrives doesn't hold them accountable for their actions. This is where interacting with the people in a bookstore becomes important in modeling integrity.

Bookstores enhance community and offer a model of integrity through reading groups. The reading groups tend to be wide-ranging and often challenge perspectives, beliefs, and perceptions of the local citizenry. They can be a source of virtuous discussion about things that ought to be considered and challenged in the community. As Connors and McCormick note, "Morality is about our struggle to achieve full humanity which we are *invited* but not *forced* to embrace" (9). Citizens are free to join any reading group and meet with other citizens to discuss what they've read. There is great freedom in this ability to choose to join or exit the conversation. But it is the responsibility of community members to be consistent in presenting their morals. It is one thing for a professor to speak of humility in a classroom of 15 students, but another test of integrity to speak with the same conviction in front of a variety of community members. In this way, bookstores allow for models of integrity by asking individuals to maintain their moral coherence in a variety of roles within the community.

Local bookstores are more than simply a storefront; they can be a shaping force for the conception of home. "Indeed, home is erected not simply with bricks and mortar but more profoundly with memories of relationships and significant events" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 241). Relationships and significant events should include discourse. In "Reconstructing the Authenticity of Place," Sharon Zukin states, "A powerful discourse becomes a rhetoric and then a strategy of growth" (162). These spaces present challenging voices and community concerns through their offerings. These stores encourage the community to make choices about future offerings and outcomes based on their purchases.

Independent record stores provide a similar experience to the one offered by bookstores. And this experience is translating into a revival of sorts. In 2017, physical music sales (CDs, vinyl albums, etc.) outpaced digital downloads for the first time since 2011 (Kastrenakes) and vinyl album sales set a single-year high of 14.3 million units (Caulfield). In a study of the experiences offered by physical record stores in the age of digital streaming, researchers Brian J. Hracs and Johan Jansson state that “independent record shops remain spaces where meanings are created, rituals are performed, interactions occur, and experiences are staged and consumed” (10). It is important to create meaning, observe rituals, and interact. This emphasis on interaction is necessary for building character at the community level and it relates to what millennial Teddy Crimmins notes in a recent commentary piece for the *Chicago Tribune*: “In the process [of visiting a record store] I had become closer to a friend, talked to someone new about something I’m passionate about, actually gotten out of my house and into the sunlight and learned something about the past.” The experiential act that Crimmins writes about is also part of an exercise in authenticity.



Buying at independent record stores keeps the profits in the local community.

In terms of authenticity and the record store, we must consider music sales, knowledgeable curation by staff, and in-store performances by local musicians whose art might not have the same opportunity to be heard otherwise. This opportunity relates to Fletcher’s concept of

authenticity in that she states authentic people and communities have “a general openness to unfamiliarity and innovation” (91). Record stores offer local musicians a space to sell their work, often through commission agreements, which allows their art to find its way into the community and keeps the profits localized. Hracs and Jansson also find that “some record shops create value by cultivating authentic atmospheres and catering to the demands of different consumers, from local ‘regulars’ to trans-local ‘record tourists’” (10). But if the

community chooses to stay home and shop from their couch on a computer or phone, these authentic aspects will continue to disappear from the community and one could begin to question if the individuals within a community truly possess or care about integrity.

Other aspects that define authenticity in a relational context are the ability to take responsibility for actions and outcomes and avoid self-deception (Fletcher 89-90). This also carries over into having integrity by once again uniting the disparate elements of the individual with society. One community space that models these aspects of authenticity and integrity is the local farmers market. Engaging in conversations about sustainable farming practices and land ethics with the farmers of one's region can help shed light on the efforts and problems an informed citizen should be aware of regarding their buying practices related to food and food sustainability. As Kyle Kramer writes in "The Magic of the Market," a commentary on being an organic farmer, "To bring produce to market, my family and I have to be faithful to the possibilities and limits of our land, skill, time, and stamina. We must be faithful to each other" (9). Kramer goes on to discuss how the market "offer[s] a glimpse of the gentler, more generous economy we would have if we began to insist that it generate real wealth, which is the faithful stewardship of community and creation" (9). The local production model contains a narrative that models human flourishing and pushes us to be better.

Supporting locally-sourced food can help us avoid self-deception about how our consumer choices affect the region. Rather than blindly purchasing highly packaged, processed, and distributed food, people buying from a local farmer are able to learn about and begin to understand the farming process, lessen the impact of packing and shipping, and also see firsthand the hard work and integrity that a small farmer puts into producing food. They can see immediate models of how choices affect outcomes in the regional community. For many



Farmers markets reflect local values and character.

citizens, this narrative of food production, distribution, and land stewardship is the starting point for becoming a “locavore.” As anthropologist Arturo Escobar notes, “It’s important to learn to see place-based cultural, ecological, and economic practices as important sources of alternative visions and strategies for reconstructing local and regional worlds” (165). Rather than seeing the farmers market as just another place to shop, it can become a model for local systems of production and a model for what the regional community desires and embraces.

The ability to model integrity through consumer practices in a public space is one of the benefits of supporting a farmers market. Buying food that is produced by farmers using organic and sustainable methods on smaller plots of land is just one way to bridge individual values with public behavior. For instance, if an individual donates online to a nonprofit organization that focuses on environmental issues, her dollars may be spent hundreds or thousands of miles away and have little influence on shaping the character of the local region. Such an undertaking doesn’t actually involve creating an authentic sense of place for the individual and can be seen as only benefiting one’s own sense of character, void of a congruent relationship with community/society.

Ultimately, local bookstores and farmers markets model authenticity through interactions, narratives, and awareness beyond only the self. They offer individuals a way to participate in a locally-driven circle of commerce that promotes community and is defined by the community. Instead of following sales pitches, promotions, and trends generated at the distant, corporate level, local businesses and spaces provide a chance for community members to shape and model authenticity in a relational way. As Fletcher summarizes, authentic people and places are “reflective, discerning, and determined . . . foster[ing] a sense of integrity, historical awareness, and adventure that bolsters responsibility and empathy, all while maintaining humility and perspective” (92). I think it is safe to say these elements are not present in those corporations that leave behind empty buildings, people, and hopes.

Conclusion

As homogenization and profit continue to drive the ever-hungry beast of consumer globalization, we must make a concerted effort to save the integrity and authenticity of our homes—the places where we dwell and flourish. The good news is that we, as members of our communities, have the power to stand up to and challenge the effects of globalization on our cities and towns. We can begin to redevelop our habits with a greater focus on preserving the good character of our hometowns and creating narratives that define a strong sense of place.

Models of virtue and ethics are always important in character development. As David Brooks has noted in his writing about character: “moral improvement occurs most reliably when the heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs” (xv). It is important to have models to mimic and practices to share. In her work on virtue and consumerism, Roberta Sassatelli notes a similar outcome:

Happiness is conceived to involve a re-embedding of people in locality and social relations of direct reciprocity. The framing of the consumer within political consumerism thus comes full circle: it codifies a series of practices which are bound up with a particular vision of what consumers should do for the common good as well as their own happiness. (236)

Therefore, if we want our communities to uphold and demonstrate particular traits of moral character, we must support the maintenance or construction of those elements through models that are both authentic and full of integrity.

The great thing about independent regional or local businesses is the opportunity for collaboration and education that lead to clearer definitions of moral character in the community. Farms host local musicians for summer concerts that draw even more members of the community out onto the land. Bookstores host the local farmers and authors for panels on land ethics. And independent restaurants offer menus made with locally-sourced, seasonal ingredients. It is a circle of interdependence, support, and knowledge-building.

This localized circle also generates narrative, discussion, and faith in and about the community. And it can lead to positive action. It can lead to authenticity as described in Connors and McCormick: “Actions *impact* the world around us (helping or harming ourselves, our neighbors, our world) for good or ill. . . . Actions are right if they help build up the humanity of others ” (11). Similarly, as Dunn argues, “A necessary element of both narrative and integrity is a stable temporal thread serving to unite seemingly disparate parts into one coherent whole”



By engaging, supporting, and building the local community narrative through our consumer habits, we continue to allow ourselves spaces to model character.

(114). By engaging, supporting, and building the local community narrative through our consumer habits, we will continue to allow ourselves spaces to model character. It is possible to rebuild and maintain the character-driven souls of our communities and to connect these local circles of values, production, and consumption.

I would like to return to Kramer for what I believe is a grand way to think about authenticity and integrity in our communities. While I have called them local circles, he has called these parts of our communities *islands*: “With care and patience, these islands can be bridged one to another into an ever-larger web of true belonging, an archipelago of economic, ecological, and social health” (9). We can and should all support building the bridge through our small but intentional actions, so we may begin to be models for the present and future character of our communities.

Andrew Jones grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. He earned a B.A. in English and did graduate work in American Literature at California State University, East Bay before completing his M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Minnesota State University Moorhead. His writing has appeared in publications such as The Tishman Review, Hobart, Sierra Nevada Review, and Poetry Midwest, among others. He is currently Assistant Professor of English & Creative Writing at the University of Dubuque.

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Notes

¹It should be noted that local businesses are still consumer-driven companies and fit within the consumer framework. For more information and discussion about this concession, see Miller and Harvey.

²The definition of record store used throughout this paper is a store that sells music in a physical format, whether it be CDs, vinyl albums, or cassette tapes. It is not meant to suggest stores that sell only vinyl albums.

³For more in-depth discussions of concepts of authenticity and integrity, see Fletcher and Dunn.

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