



Flatness and The Man With a 'Ho'



By John Loofbourow, MD

MORE THAN 100 YEARS AGO Markham's great and powerful poem alerted this nation and Europe to the need for social justice, accusing society of brutal disregard for those who work in the fields. Yet now, as I read again his best-known poetic creation, *The Man With a Hoe*, I find myself moved by the poet's eloquence, but unconvinced of the alleged injustice.

Living and working over many summers with *braceros*, I shared their pride in what we did. It seems to me the poet was oblivious to the simple joy of plain hard physical work. The man with the hoe was not always old and bent by time; he once found hope and meaning in work, delighting in his strength and youth, as do millions of men and women all over the world today. Some who work here illegally today defiantly and repeatedly cross the border by night to spend time with those who prosper because of their toil. What matters to them and to us all is that we feel fulfilled and proud of what we do, whether writing poetry or tilling soil.

Lately I have been reading Tom Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*. In its pages he describes a boundless universe filled with opportunity during that brief and often foolish journey called life. It is a delightful book, filled with incisive, nuanced commentary and interviews with flat earth people from all walks of life and cultures. The horizontal power of the Internet has removed barriers posed by mountains, distance, language, and borders. It seems possible that the earth's billion or more economic untouchables can enter into a productive and rewarding middle class of personal hope and progress during their lifetimes. His evidence comes from India, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Southeast Asia, the Filipinas, and East Europe. He dates the Flattening to the fall of the Berlin Wall on 11/9/89 and the simultaneous rise of the Internet. He contrasts that starkly with 9/11, 2001 when the flattening world was challenged by terrorist warfare. Ironically, the net is vital to both 11/9 and 9/11. Of course terrorism as a form of warfare or rule is not new; even the Greeks had a name for it: *tromo kratia* or rule by terror, in contrast to *demo kratia*, rule by people.

I have, since 2001, developed a habit of reading while occasionally glancing at a muted TV. As I read of flatness, my quiet room thrums with the silent images of radical Islamist warfare, AIDS, and genocide. After a long series of commercials, the Jerry Springer show fills the silent screen, flashing faces that are piteous, but ugly and dangerous where Markham's man was broken and mute. A woman in a purple lycra bra is bent over yelling at a sullen man. These are American faces, faces also found in our jails, inner city schools, streets, courts, and increasingly, in our politics. I take liberties with Markham's poem, and write of this new American:

*Unconnected to Adam, Adams, or Macadam,
Fettered to the present tense,
A thing that neither grieves nor hopes,
Whose essence is love and hate of self,
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings
When this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world,*

After the silence of the centuries?'

My cell phone shatters the TV silence. It's my daughter, calling from a thousand miles away. I tell her of Friedman's flat world and my mutilation of Markham's poem. It reminds her of something: she reads me an excerpt from Edwin Abbott's book, *Flatland*, in which the protagonist, a Square from the second dimension, journeys to the first dimension with the help of a Virgil-like Sphere. As it turns out, all the first dimension contains is one Point:

"Behold yon miserable creature. That Point is a Being like ourselves, but confined to the non-dimensional Gulf. He is himself his own World, his own Universe; of any other than himself he can form no conception; he knows not Length, nor Breadth, nor Height, for he has had no experience of them; he has no cognizance even of the number Two; nor has he a thought of Plurality; for he is himself his One and All, being really Nothing. Yet mark his perfect self-contentment, and hence learn this lesson, that to be self-contented is to be vile and ignorant, and that to aspire is better than to be blindly and impotently happy."

My TV pulses silently on, flashing talking faces amidst scenes of Katrina's aftermath. By now I know without hearing what the faces are saying: *"evidence of embedded poverty, societal failure, neglect, racism, and governmental incompetence. Act! React! Enact!"* But I recall that as the crisis unfolded, the most immediately effective and helpful organizations were small communities and churches nearby, the Salvation Army; and individuals, independently or through the Red Cross. I think it will always be so. The best government is by definition limited; if not, it becomes corrupted and abusive, often in the name of Goodness, or Charitableness. It seems, then, that even in a flattening world, charity comes most directly and immediately from individuals.

The OED provides some sixteen definitions of charity under various headings and subheadings; the first five are intimately connected to religion. I reflect that while there may be many Dr. Newdows who personally neither want nor need religious guidelines, there are many other people who find strength, hope and a sense of responsibility-and therefore a sense of value and personal worth-in their various faiths. Newdow does not dispute that, but nonetheless hopes to remove all reference to religion from public life. That would be a grave error. While our government cannot constitutionally impose a state religion on us, neither must it impose atheism in our schools or public life; rather, it must protect our right to religious liberty, including atheism, public or private. That is clearly inherent to the freedom of speech and religion.

James Michener quotes a proverb on charity in *The Source* that goes something like this:

The lowest form of charity is that where both parties are aware of the giver and the gift.

A higher form of charity is where only the donor is aware of both beneficiary and gift.

The highest form of charity is where both know that something of value has been exchanged; each is an equal giver and recipient.

An impersonal form of the same thing is the basis for a free market economy. Might this, then-the exchange of goods, the relationship between seller and buyer, be the key to broadening the bases for a global sense of connectedness? Perhaps.

In any event, the evidence implies that we cannot advance middle class values by throwing money or laws at people, but only by nourishing pride, and hope. It is painfully obvious, for example, that our educational system, while satisfactory for many, has failed a large and growing segment of our society, further swelling the ranks of those who never benefit from the flatness of the world of Dell or Microsoft, India, China, Taiwan, or even to the pleasure of hard work well done. For them, our educational system is neither efficient, nor sufficient, unless our ideal is the man and the "ho" on the Springer show, and our goal the further deterioration of those shameful statistics that place our people well behind other industrialized nations in many measures of national health.

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Closing lines from 'The Man With a Hoe', Edwin Markham, 1852-1940 Opening lines are raw poetic power, as follows:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back, the burden of the world...

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