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How to Leave a Mark on People



David Brooks APRIL 18, 2017



Firefighters last month at the wake for Joe Toscano. Barry Chin/The Boston Globe, via Getty Images

Joe Toscano and I worked at Incarnation summer camp in Connecticut a few decades ago. Joe went on to become an extremely loving father of five and a fireman in Watertown, Mass. Joe was a community-building guy — serving his town, organizing events like fishing derbies for bevvies of kids, radiating infectious and neighborly joy.

Joe collapsed and died while fighting a two-alarm fire last month. When Joe died, the Incarnation community reached out with a fierce urgency to support his family and each other. One of our number served as a eulogist at the funeral. Everybody started posting old photos of Joe on Facebook. Somebody posted a picture of 250 Incarnation alumni at a reunion, with the caption, “My Family.”

Some organizations are thick, and some are thin. Some leave a mark on you, and some you pass through with scarcely a memory. I haven’t worked at Incarnation for 30 years, but it remains one of the four or five thick institutions in my life, and in so many other lives.

Which raises two questions: What makes an institution thick? If you were setting out consciously to create a thick institution, what features would it include?

A thick institution is not one that people use instrumentally, to get a degree or to earn a salary. A thick institution becomes part of a person’s identity and engages the whole person: head, hands, heart and soul. So thick institutions have a physical location, often cramped, where members meet face to face on a regular basis, like a dinner table or a packed gym or assembly hall.

Such institutions have a set of collective rituals — fasting or reciting or standing in formation. They have shared tasks, which often involve members closely watching one another, the way hockey teammates have to observe everybody else on the ice. In such institutions people occasionally sleep overnight in the same retreat center or facility, so that everybody can see each other’s real self, before makeup and after dinner.

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Such organizations often tell and retell a sacred origin story about themselves. Many experienced a moment when they nearly failed, and they celebrate the heroes who pulled them from the brink. They incorporate music into daily life, because it is hard not to become bonded with someone you have sung and danced with. They have a common ideal — encapsulated, for example, in the Semper Fi motto for the Marines.

It's also important to have an idiosyncratic local culture. Too many colleges, for example, feel like one another. But the ones that really leave a mark on their students (St. John's, Morehouse, Wheaton, the University of Chicago) have the courage to be distinct. You can love or hate such places. But when you meet a graduate you know it, and when they meet each other, even decades hence, they know they have something important in common.

As I was thinking about my list of traits, Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania shared with me a similar list, titled, "What causes individuals to adopt the identity of their microculture?" She had a lot of my items but more, such as a shared goal, like winning the Super Bowl or saving the environment; initiation rituals, especially those that are difficult; a sacred guidebook or object passed down from generation to generation; distinct jargon and phrases that are spoken inside the culture but misunderstood outside it; a label, like being a KIPPster for a KIPP school student; and finally uniforms or other emblems, such as flags, rings, bracelets or even secret underwear.

Thick institutions have a different moral ecology. People tend to like the version of themselves that is called forth by such places. James Davison Hunter and Ryan Olson of the University of Virginia study thick and thin moral frameworks. They point to the fact that thin organizations look to take advantage of people's strengths and treat people as resources to be marshaled. Thick organizations think in terms of virtue and vice. They take advantage of people's desire to do good and arouse their higher longings.

In other words, thin institutions tend to see themselves horizontally. People are members for mutual benefit. Thick organizations often see themselves on a vertical axis. People are members so they can collectively serve the same higher good.

In the former, there's an ever-present utilitarian calculus — Is this working for me? Am I getting more out than I'm putting in? — that creates a distance between people and the organization. In the latter, there's an intimacy and identity borne out of common love. Think of a bunch of teachers watching a student shine onstage or a bunch of engineers adoring the same elegant solution.

I never got to see Joey T. fight a fire. But I watched him run a bunch of the camp reunion fishing derbies. If you'd asked him, are you doing this for the kids or for yourself, I'm not sure the question would have made sense. In a thick organization selfishness and selflessness marry. It fulfills your purpose to help others have a good day.

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