

The Quest for Community

But today it's a particular kind of community.

Leonard Sweet

I am an eBay addict. I may need help. My most recent purchase is one of the first books published by my Ph.D. adviser. It has been missing from my library for 20 years. I got this copy for 50 cents. The postage cost more than the book. But for \$2.50 I reclaimed my pedigree. At eBay, I feel like a kid in a candy store.

The online auction house is one of the wonders of the last decade. From 1995 to 1998, eBay did no outside advertising; yet it boasted 3.8 million registered users and grew from 289,000 items in 1996 to 2.2 million today. With a \$23-billion market, eBay is now worth more than Kmart, Toys R Us, Nordstrom, and Saks combined.

eBay is so effective because its owners understand postmodern culture. It also alerts us to what the church must do to get the attention and attendance of postmodern people.

Just do it!

eBay makes shopping an experience. Journalist Stewart Alsop, analyzing the phenomenon, calls it "nail-biting, thrilling fun." eBay works in our experience-oriented economy. What keeps shoppers returning to a store? Not just the products. As one patron said, leaving a new Greenwich Village eatery called Peanut Butter and Company, "This is very much an experience; it's not just a sandwich."

Postmoderns are not willing to live at even an arm's length from experience. They want life to explode all around them. And the more extreme the better.

Tom Beaudoin, a Gen-X Christian with a theology degree from Harvard and a body piercing, says that piercing and tattooing "reflect the centrality of personal and intimate experience in Xers' lives." Tattooing is branding in a brand culture, the marking of a spiritual experience.

The pursuit of dreams, emotions, and extreme experience is not unique to this era. Every expression of romanticism in history has tilted toward the experiential. But never before has experience become the currency of a global economic system.

American Demographics (April 1999) esteemed the quest for experiential faith one of the nation's most important cultural trends. Yet the numbers turning

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to the church for guidance in this soul quest are becoming fewer and fewer. A spiritual awakening is taking place largely outside the Christian church because churches, in the words of journalist Chip Brown, "were more interested in repressing ecstatic experience than in nurturing it. Rapture (the emotion), not to say healing, was certainly not on the agenda of the church I was packed off to each Sunday morning."

To connect with postmoderns, the church will become more:

Experiential

Participatory

Image-driven

Communal

To be sure, experiences can become idolatrous as well as addictive. Postmoderns collect experiences like moderns collect stuff. The church must offer Christ-initiated—or what Donald Whitney calls "Scripture-induced"—experiences.

Count me in

A fellow eBay-er calls the auction site a "participant sport." I felt such an adrenaline rush during my weeklong bidding war over an 1827 pewter communion token. eBay has made me into a global trader. It's exhilarating.

At eBay the power belongs to the people, not to the producers. In electronic commerce, the buyer sets the price. It's the medieval bazaar come to life in cyberspace.

Some call this haggling the "age of participation." Others call it the "horizontal society." Postmodern people take cues not from those above them but from others around them. There are no more bosses, only clients.

The Web typifies the trend. Online, we're all experts: we're all priests, we're all doctors or lawyers or architects, we're all authorities in whatever we're chatting about at the moment.

And we're already seeing its impact in church. The rituals of marriage and remembrance are becoming more EPIC.

More than clinking glasses, weddings also feature pull-the-kiss-from-the-hat performances, the surrender of the keys, and couples presenting to each other symbols of the things they bring to their union.

Do-it-yourself funerals are at a record high. More people are burying their dead without embalming, mortuaries, or cemeteries. More participatory rites are being created alongside official rituals, including *ad hoc* shrines, white caskets that mourners can sign, and eulogies in which almost everyone present has got to say something.

The problem is no longer onerous taxation without representation. The problem now is worship without participation. In the church, representation simply isn't enough anymore.

Get the picture?

Visit as many of the more than 2 million eBay sites as you want. You'll find each one has an image of what is for sale. Each image comes to life with story and sometimes music. Each site tries to draw you into a relationship with that image and story.

eBay is not alone in using images to establish relationships. NCR's ATM machines are "transforming transactions into relationships" according to their ads. Agency.com is dedicated to what it calls "interactive relationship management." Its slogan: "It's not the medium, it's the relationship."

The lesson for the church is simple: images generate emotions and people will respond to their feelings.

Postmodern culture is image-driven. The modern world was word-based. Not until the fourteenth century did truth become embedded in principles and positions. Its theologians tried to create an intellectual faith, placing reason and order at the heart of religion. Mystery and metaphor were seen as too fuzzy, too mystical, too illogical.

The church now enters a world where metaphor is at the heart of spirituality. Propositions are lost on postmodern ears; but metaphor they will hear, images they will see and understand. These come as close as human beings will get to a universal language. Indeed, it seems clearer than ever that metaphysics is nothing but metaphor.

Someday I will hold up my Bible before a congregation, shake it, and yell at the top of my lungs, "This is not a book about propositions and programs and principles. This is a book about relationships."

The church, not Hollywood, ought to be the world's greatest image factory. The greatest image in the world, the image that draws people into real, life-giving relationship, is the image of God in Jesus the Christ.

I want my community

One of the favorite words used in the context of the Web is "community." eBay is in the business of building communities, they say; theirs is less an information source than a social medium.

The paradox is this: the pursuit of individualism has led us to this place of hunger for community, not of blood or nation but communities of choice.

More than buying and selling, the electronic emporium is about posting messages on bulletin boards, discovering new friends, and launching relationships at the eBay Cafe.

One user said, "eBay is bringing people together to do a lot more than trading goods. We are trading our hearts."

Don't laugh.

eBay may just be the closest experience of small-town America available to postmoderns. Where else can they find people with similar interests (whale oil lamps, in my case)? Where else can they be drawn into community around a single purpose? Where else can they tell the stories most central to who they are and find people eager to hear them? Where else can they participate so fully and have their lives changed by the experience?

Nowhere else.

Except, perhaps, the church.

And isn't that what the gospel is all about?

*Leonard Sweet is professor of postmodern Christianity at
Drew University Theological School
Madison, New Jersey
LenISweet@aol.com*

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