

Cultural Drift

Robots have become necessary in many manufacturing processes. Car bodies, once welded together by humans, are now welded more quickly and accurately by robots which do the same process over and over without tiring. Robots are especially adept at repetitive tasks requiring a significant amount of precision.

But robots also cause engineers significant headaches, and one of the biggest problems that must be overcome is what is referred to as “robot drift.” Let’s say, for example, that a robot must weld two pieces of steel, 10 cm long, together. Those pieces of steel are placed in a jig, and the robot then moves into place and engages the electrical current and welds them together. In order to have a strong weld, the robot must be exactly in the right place every time. The problem is this: robots, as well built as many of them are, tend to have a little play in their joints. After five or ten or even one hundred welds, this may not be noticeable, but after a full week of welding, the robot could be placing the weld a two millimetres to the right of where it should be. It doesn’t sound like much, but anyone who welds knows that the two piece of steel will not be joined together if this happens.

To solve the problem, engineers must design the robot so that it returns to his “home” regularly. This “home” is a fixed point where the software can reset so that any drift can be eliminated and the robot can begin anew. Robot drift is often imperceptible and even unmeasurable, but it can become quite problematic over time.

Culture is a little like a robot. The culture of a place rarely changes rapidly. Occasionally there are circumstances that introduce more rapid change (influx of immigrants, recession, invention of labour-saving devices), but most often the culture of a place appears to remain mostly the same, or at least as we perceive it.

But, as we well know, culture also drifts. I daresay that Canadian culture is markedly different today from what it was 100 or even 50 years ago. Forces have been acting on Canadian culture so that today things that were unheard of half a century ago are now considered to be normal. Eating out used to be an event, but today many of us eat in a restaurant of some sort several times a month. (I didn’t eat in a restaurant until I was about 12 years old.) Sometimes the cultural shifts are quite innocuous, but sometimes they are more dangerous. Our minds might turn to the obvious ones – sexual practices or the legalization and use of mind-altering narcotics – but there are many less obvious but potentially equally dangerous changes. One family psychologist in a radio talk show suggested that families have a meal together once every week. As I was listening, I thought she would say, “once a day,” but apparently many families never have a meal together except, perhaps, for special occasions. One of the reasons cited is that children are often so involved in such a variety of activities that the family has no time to sit down together for a meal. The family unit is no longer functioning, this psychologist said, and, as a result, children are not receiving regular guidance from their parents. I suspect that half a century ago things were very different.

Culture, like robots, tends to drift, and the changes that are made are often imperceptible until, of course, we realize that something isn’t working. The accumulation of the drift is the real problem.

Like robots, culture needs to be reset. We need to return a home position, and we need to return to that home position often. It goes without saying that Scripture provides the “home setting” for all cultures. Scripture doesn’t impose a particular (e.g. western) culture on its readers, but it does outline some of the things that are essential for culture to be proper and good. Recognition and worship of a gracious and almighty God and a humble submission to his authority is one of the main teachings of Scripture. Trust in Jesus Christ of our salvation flows out of this. Caring for others is an essential part of Christian culture. We need to be reminded of these values often because, if we aren’t, we will drift further and further from them. In the home I grew up in, we read the Bible at every mealtime, attended Sunday School and catechism, worshipped twice on Sunday, and were encouraged in our personal devotions. Perhaps many of us have drifted from that, and, perhaps, as a result, many of us do not have the same intense commitment to God and his ways that former generations may have had. We might discover that we have drifted quite a distance from where we should be.

It’s not that we need to return to the way things used to be. That is not resetting ourselves. Rather, we should find ways to regularly engage with Scripture so that our minds and hearts can be turned again to the Lord and his ways. It might be that the old ways were the best, but it may also be that we have to find new and appropriate ways to reset ourselves by engaging God’s Word in different ways from the traditional ways, if the old ways don’t work for us. With new technology, the possibilities are numerous. But, whatever we do, we all need to be reset back to our homes, namely to the teachings of Scripture, very regularly.

One final note: culture will continue to drift, and it is very unlikely that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, will be able to prevent that drift. It is quite likely that attempts we make to influence our culture to return to what we define as a Christian culture will fail. It’s far more likely that we will find ourselves, as we reset, becoming more and more different from the culture around us. This we must accept, as hard as that may be.

If we return to the robot and its weld, it seems fairly reasonable to say that our current culture is welding far off the joint between the two pieces of steel. Things are not working as they should, and we can sense the problems. We are heavily influenced by the world around us, and we may think that drawing a bead of weld 2 centimetres from the joint is acceptable because that is what everyone else is doing. It is good to be reminded that, following first question and answer of the Westminster Confession, “our purpose as human beings is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” and living by that wisdom is drawing a bead of weld where it belongs, regardless of what everyone else is doing.

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