

# John Deere and the Bereavement Counselor

## Lecture

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**by John McKnight**

In 1973, only eleven years ago, E. F. Schumacher startled Western societies with a revolutionary economic analysis that proclaimed "small is beautiful." His book of that title concluded with these words:

*The guidance we need . . . cannot be found in science or technology, the value of which utterly depends on the ends they serve; but it can still be found in the traditional wisdom of mankind.*

Because traditional wisdom is passed on through stories rather than studies, it seems appropriate that this lecture should take the form of a story.

The story begins as European pioneers crossed the Alleghenies and started to settle the Midwest. The land they found was covered with forests. With incredible effort they felled the trees, pulled the stumps, and planted their crops in the rich, loamy soil.

When they reached the western edge of the place we now call Indiana, the forests stopped; ahead lay a thousand miles of the great grass prairie. The Europeans were puzzled by this new environment. Some even called it "the Great Desert." It seemed untillable. The earth was often very wet, and it was covered with centuries of tangled and matted grasses.

With their cast iron plows, the settlers found that the prairie sod could not be cut and the wet earth stuck to their plowshares. Even a team of the best oxen bogged down after a few yards of tugging. The iron plow was a useless tool to farm the prairie soil. The pioneers were stymied for nearly two decades. Their western march was halted and they filled in the eastern regions of the Midwest.

In 1837 a blacksmith in the town of Grand Detour, Illinois, invented a new tool. His name was John Deere, and the tool was a plow made of steel. It was sharp enough to cut through matted grasses and smooth enough to cast off the mud. It was a simple tool, the "sodbuster" which opened the great prairies to agricultural development.

Sauk County, Wisconsin, is the part of that prairie where I have a home. It is named after the Sauk Indians. In 1673 Father Marquette became the first European to lay eyes upon their land. He found a village laid out in regular patterns on a plain beside the Wisconsin River. He called the place Prairie du Sac. The village was surrounded by fields that had provided maize, beans, and squash for the Sauk people for generations reaching back into unrecorded time.

When the European settlers arrived at the Sauk prairie in 1837, the government forced the native Sauk people west of the Mississippi River. The settlers came with John Deere's new invention and used the tool to open the area to a new kind of agriculture. They ignored the traditional ways of the Sauk Indians and used their sodbusting tool for planting wheat.

Initially the soil was generous and the farmers thrived. Each year, however, the soil lost more of its nurturing power. Within thirty years after the Europeans arrived with their new technology, the land was depleted. Wheat farming became uneconomic, and tens of thousands of farmers left Wisconsin seeking new land with sod to bust.

It took the Europeans and their new technology just one generation to make their homeland into a desert. The Sauk Indians, who knew how to sustain themselves on the Sauk prairieland, were banished to another kind of desert called a reservation. And even they forgot about the techniques and tools that had sustained them on the prairie for generations unrecorded.

And that is how it was that three deserts were created—Wisconsin, the reservation, and the memories of the people.

A century later, the land of the Sauks is now populated by the children of a second wave of European farmers who learned to replenish the soil through the regenerative powers of dairying, ground cover crops, and animal manures. These third and fourth generation farmers and townspeople do not realize, however, that a new settler is coming soon with an invention as powerful as John Deere's plow.

The new technology is called "bereavement counseling." It is a tool forged at the great state university, an innovative technique to meet the needs of those experiencing the death of a loved one, a tool that can "process" the grief of the people who now live on the prairie of the Sauk.

As one can imagine the final days of the village of the Sauk Indians before the arrival of the settlers with John Deere's plow, one can also imagine these final days before the arrival of the first bereavement counselor at Prairie du Sac: the farmers and the townspeople mourn at the death of a mother, brother, son, or friend. The bereaved are joined by neighbors and kin. They meet grief together in lamentation, prayer, and song. They call upon the words of the clergy and surround themselves in community.

It is in these ways that they grieve and then go on with life. Through their mourning they are assured of the bonds among them and are renewed in the knowledge that this death is a part of the past and the future of the people on the Prairie of the Sauk. Their grief is common property, an anguish from which the community draws strength and gives the bereaved the courage to move ahead.

It is into this prairie community that the bereavement counselor comes with the new grief technology. The counselor calls the invention a service and assures the prairie folk of its effectiveness and superiority by invoking the name of the great university while displaying a diploma and certificate.

We can imagine that at first the local people will be puzzled by the bereavement counselor's claims; however, the counselor will tell a few of them that the new technique is meant merely to assist the bereaved's community at the time of death. To some other prairie folk who are isolated or forgotten the counselor will offer help in grief processing. These lonely souls will accept the intervention, mistaking the counselor for a friend.

For those who are penniless the counselor will approach the County Board and advocate the right to treatment for these unfortunate souls. This right will be guaranteed by the Board's decision to reimburse those too poor to pay for counseling services.

There will be others, schooled to believe in the innovative new tools certified by universities and medical centers, who will seek out the bereavement counselor by force of habit. And one of these people will tell a bereaved neighbor who is unschooled that unless his grief is processed by a counselor, he will probably have major psychological problems later in life.

Several people will begin to use the bereavement counselor because the County Board now taxes them to insure access to the technology, and they will feel that to fail to be counseled is to waste their money and to be denied a benefit or even a right.

Finally, one day the aged father of a Prairie du Sac woman will die. And next-door neighbors will not drop by because they don't want to interrupt the bereavement counselor. The woman's kin will stay home because they will have learned that only the bereavement counselor knows how to process grief in the proper way. The local clergy will seek technical assistance from the bereavement counselor to learn the correct form of service to deal with guilt and grief. And the grieving daughter will know that it is the bereavement counselor who really cares for her because only the bereavement counselor comes when death visits this family on the prairie.

It will be only one generation between the time the bereavement counselor arrives and the community of mourners disappears. The counselor's new tool will cut through the social fabric, throwing aside kinship, care, neighborly obligations, and community ways of coming together and going on. Like John Deere's plow, the tools of bereavement counseling will create a desert where a community once flourished.

Eventually, even the bereavement counselor will see the impossibility of restoring hope in clients once they are genuinely alone with nothing but a service for consolation. With the inevitable failure of the service, the bereavement counselor will find the desert even in herself.

There are those who would say that neither John Deere nor the bereavement counselor has created a desert. Rather, they would argue that these new tools have great benefits and that we have focused unduly on a few negative side effects. Indeed, they might agree with Eli Lilly, whose motto was, "A drug without side effects is no drug at all."

To those with this perspective, the critical issue is the amelioration of the negative side effects. In Eli Lilly's idiom, they can conceive of a new drowsiness-creating pill designed to overcome the nausea caused by an anti-cancer drug. They envision a prairie scattered with pyramids of new technologies and techniques, each designed to correct the error of its predecessor but none without its own error to be corrected. In building these pyramids they will also recognize the unlimited opportunities for research, development, and badly needed employment. Many will even name this pyramiding process "progress" and will note its positive effect upon the gross national product.

The countervailing view holds that these pyramiding service technologies are now counterproductive constructions, essentially impediments rather than monuments.

Schumacher helped clarify for many of us the nature of those physical tools that are so counterproductive that they become impediments. There is growing recognition of the waste and devastation created by these new physical tools, from nuclear generators to supersonic transports. They are the sons and daughters of the sodbuster.

It is much less obvious to many that the bereavement counselor is also the sodbuster's heir. It is more difficult for us to see how service technology creates deserts. In fact, there are even those who argue that a good society should scrap its nuclear generators in order to recast them into plowshares of service. They would replace the counterproductive goods technology with the service technology of modern medical centers, universities, correctional systems, and nursing homes. It is essential, therefore, that we have new measures of service technologies that will allow us to distinguish those that are impediments from those that are monuments.

We can assess the degree of impediment incorporated in modern service technologies by weighing four basic elements. The first is the monetary cost. At what point does the economics of a service technology consume enough of the commonwealth that all of the society becomes eccentric and distorted?

Schumacher helped us recognize the radical social, political, and environmental distortions created by huge investments in covering our land with concrete in the name of transportation. Similarly, we are now investing 12 percent of our national wealth in 'health-care technology' that blankets most of our communities with a medicalized understanding of well-being. As a result we now imagine that there are mutant human beings called health consumers. We create costly 'health-making' environments that are usually large windowless rooms filled with immobile adult bicycles and dreadfully heavy objects purported to benefit one if they are lifted.

The second element to be weighed has been identified by Ivan Illich as 'specific counterproductivity'. Beyond the negative side effects is the possibility that a service technology can produce the specific inverse of its stated purpose. Thus, one can imagine sickening medicine, stupid-making schools, and crime-making correctional systems.

The evidence grows that some service technologies are now so counterproductive that their abolition would be the most productive means to achieve the goal for which they were initially established. Take, for example, the experiments in Massachusetts, where, under the leadership of Dr. Jerome Miller, the juvenile correctional institutions were closed. As the most recent evaluation studies indicate, the Massachusetts recidivism rate has declined while comparable states with increasing institutionalized populations see an increase in youthful criminality. There is also the unmentionable fact that during doctors' strikes in Israel, Canada, and the United States the death rate took an unprecedented plunge.

Perhaps the most telling example of specifically counterproductive service technologies is the Medicaid program that provides "health care for the poor." In most states the amount expended for medical care for the poor is now greater than the cash welfare income provided that same population. Thus, a low-income mother is given one dollar in income and a dollar fifty in medical care. It is perfectly clear that the single greatest cause of her ill health is her low income. Nonetheless, the response to her sickening poverty is an ever-growing investment in medical technology—an investment that now consumes her income.

The third element to be weighed is loss of knowledge. Many of the settlers who came to Wisconsin with John Deere's sodbuster had been peasant farmers in Europe. There they had tilled the land for centuries, using methods that replenished its nourishing capacity; however, once the land seemed unlimited and John Deere's technology came to dominate, they forgot the tools and methods that had sustained them for centuries in the old land and created a new desert.

The same process is at work with the modern service technologies and the professions that use them. One of the most vivid examples involves the methods of a new breed of technocrats called pediatricians and obstetricians. During the first half of the century these technocrats believed that the preferred method of feeding babies was with a manufactured formula rather than breast milk. Acting as agents for the new lactation

technology, these professionals persuaded a generation of women to abjure breast-feeding in favor of their more "healthful" way.

In the 1950s in a Chicago suburb there was one woman who still remembered that babies could be fed by breast as well as by can, but she could find no professional who would advise her to feed by breast. Therefore, she began a search throughout the area for someone who might still remember something about the process of breast-feeding. Fortunately, she found one woman whose memory included the information necessary to begin the flow of milk. From that faint memory breast-feeding began its long struggle toward restoration in our society. These women started a club that multiplied into thousands of small communities and became an international association of women dedicated to breast-feeding: La Leche League. This incredible movement reversed the technological imperative in only one generation and has established breast-feeding as a norm in spite of the countervailing views of the service technologists.

Indeed, it was just a few years ago that the American Academy of Pediatrics finally took the official position that breast-feeding is preferable to nurturing infants from canned products. It was as though the Sauk Indians had recovered the Wisconsin prairie and allowed it once again to nourish a people with popular tools.

The fourth element to be weighed is the "hidden curriculum" of the service technologies. As they are implemented through professional techniques, the invisible message of the interaction between professional and client is, "You will be better because I know better," and as these techniques proliferate across the social landscape, they represent a new praxis, an ever-growing pedagogy that teaches this basic message of the service technologies. Through the propagation of belief in authoritative expertise the professionals cut through the social fabric of community and sow clienthood where citizenship once grew.

It is clear, therefore, that to assess the purported benefits of service technologies they must be weighed against the sum of the socially distorting monetary costs to the commonwealth, the inverse effects of the interventions, the loss of knowledge regarding the natural tools and skills of community, and the anti-democratic consciousness created by a nation of clients. If we weigh these factors, we can begin to recognize how often the techniques of professionalized service make social deserts where communities once bloomed.

Unfortunately, the bereavement counselor is but one of many new professionalized servicers that plow over our communities like John Deere's sodbusting settlers. These new technologists have now occupied much of the community's space and represent a powerful force for colonizing what remains of social relations. Nonetheless, resistance against this invasion can still be seen in local community struggles against the designs of planners, in parents' unions demanding control over their children's education, women's groups struggling to reclaim their medicalized bodies, and community efforts to steal the property of lawyers by settling their own disputes and conflicts.

Frequently, as in the case of La Leche League, this decolonization effort is successful. Often, however, the resistance fails and the new service technologies transform communities into social deserts grown over with the scrub of clients and consumers.

This process is reminiscent of the final British conquest of Scotland after the Battle of Culloden. The British were convinced by a history of repeated uprisings that the Scottish tribes would never be subdued. Therefore, after the battle the British killed many of the clansmen and forced the rest from their small crofts into coastal towns where there was no choice but to emigrate. Great Britain was freed of the tribal threat. The clans were decimated and their lands given to the English lords who grazed sheep where communities once flourished. My Scots' ancestors said of this final solution of the Anglo-Saxons, "They created a desert and called it freedom."

Our modern experience with service technologies tells us that it is difficult to recapture professionally occupied space. We have also learned that whenever such space is liberated, it is even more difficult to construct a new social order that will not be quickly co-opted again. A vivid example is the unfortunate trend developing within the hospice movement. Those who initiated the movement in the United States were attempting to detechnologize dying—to wrest death from the hospital and return it to the family. Only a decade after the movement began, we can see the rapid growth of "hospital-based hospices" and new legislation reimbursing those hospices that will formally tie themselves to hospitals and employ physicians as central "care givers."

The professional co-option of community efforts to invent appropriate techniques for citizens to care in community has been pervasive. Therefore, we need to identify the characteristics of those social forms that are resistant to colonization by service technologies while enabling communities to cultivate and care. These authentic social forms are characterized by three basic dimensions: they tend to be uncommodified, unmanaged, and uncurricularized.

The tools of the bereavement counselor make grief into a commodity rather than an opportunity for community. Service technologies convert conditions into commodities and care into service.

The tools of the manager convert communality into hierarchy, replacing consent with control. Where once there was a commons, the manager creates a corporation.

The tools of the pedagogue create monopolies in the place of cultures. By making a school of every-day life, community definitions and citizen action are degraded and finally expelled.

It is this hard-working team—the service professional, the manager, and the pedagogue—that pulls the tools of "community busting" through the modern social landscape. If we are to recultivate community, we will need to return this team to the stable, abjuring their use.

How will we learn to cultivate community again? It was E. F. Schumacher who concluded that the "guidance we need . . . can still be found in the traditional wisdom."Therefore, we can return to those who understand how to allow the Sauk prairie to bloom and sustain a people. One of the leaders of the Sauk was a chief named Blackhawk. After his people were exiled to the land west of the Mississippi, and his resistance movement was broken at the Battle of Bad Axe, Blackhawk said of his Sauk prairie home:

There, we always had plenty; our children never cried from hunger, neither were our people in want. The rapids of our river furnished us with an abundance of excellent fish, and the land, being fertile, never failed to produce good crops of corn, beans, pumpkins and squashes. Here our village stood for more than a hundred years. Our village was healthy and there was no place in the country possessing such advantages, nor hunting grounds better than ours. If a prophet had come to our village in those days and told us that the things were to take place which have since come to pass, none of our people would have believed in the prophecy.

But the settlers came with their new tools and the prophecy was fulfilled. One of Blackhawk's Wintu sisters described the result:

The white people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we kill meat, we eat it all. When we dig roots, we make little holes. When we build houses, we make little holes. When we burn grass for grasshoppers, we don't ruin things. We shake down acorns and pine nuts. We don't chop down trees. We only use dead wood. But the white people plow up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't. I am sore. Don't hurt me!" But they chop it down and cut it up.

The spirit of the land hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depths. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. . . . They blast rocks and scatter them on the ground. The rock says, "Don't. You are hurting me!" But the white people pay no attention. When [we] use rocks, we take only little round ones for cooking . . . .

How can the spirit of the earth like the white man? Everywhere they have touched the earth it is sore.

Blackhawk and his Wintu sister tell us that the land has a Spirit. Their community on the prairie was a people guided by that Spirit. When John Deere's people came to the Sauk prairie, they exorcised the prairie Spirit in the name of a new God, technology. Because it was a God of their making, they believed they were Gods themselves. And they made a desert.

There are incredible possibilities if we are willing to fail to be Gods.