



The Center for \_\_\_\_\_  
**SOCIAL LEADERSHIP**

# Reclaiming Adult Society

The Four Cultures Corrupting America, & What Must Replace Them

Oliver DeMille

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## About The Center for Social Leadership

The Center for Social Leadership (CSL) is a think tank and action organization dedicated to building [social leaders](#) for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Humanity is experiencing dramatic changes. Traditional leadership is broken. Conventional human organization based on hierarchies and formal authority is outdated. Technology has transformed the way we interact and enhanced our ability to have impact—for good or ill. The Center for Social Leadership was formed to steer these changes to improve the health of society, preserve freedom, and ensure peace and prosperity for humanity. A new vision of leadership is needed. Not the old, hierarchical, positional, authoritative, privileged-elite leadership, but a new democratic, action-determined, service-oriented leadership. Through this social leadership mankind can achieve unprecedented happiness and fulfillment.

Learn more and engage with CSL by [reading our e-book](#) and joining our mailing list at [www.TheSocialLeader.com](http://www.TheSocialLeader.com).

**“It’s not about someone doing everything. It’s about everyone doing something.”**



Every child looks forward to the freedoms and responsibilities of being an adult. Liberty is a blessing of maturity, and a free society is only maintained by a culture of adults. While this may be obvious, it has become a challenge in our day. The term “adult” has come to be commonly defined as anyone above a certain age—and has largely lost its qualitative nuance; but of course not all people older than twenty-one are free.

True adulthood requires more than maintaining a heartbeat for two or more decades. To achieve and perpetuate freedom, societies need a culture which accepts and exhibits the [responsibilities and leadership of adulthood](#).

This is more difficult to achieve than first meets the eye. When the general culture isn't up to freedom standards, it is easy for people to go along with the norm. Indeed, one reason freedom is so truly rare in history is the difficulty of changing cultural norms.

Let's consider four cultures that have widespread influence today.

## Elementary Culture

The culture of grade schools has huge impact beyond the schoolyard. Elementary Culture values the following:



- Staying in the good graces of those above you, especially the authorities
- Reliance on experts
- Dependence on basic needs and remedies being provided
- Playing
- Having good toys
- Learning and following the rules
- Getting rewards from the authorities by meeting their expectations

As good as these things may be for classroom and playground management, they are less enchanting as cultural underpinnings for adult neighborhoods, towns, cities and nations. Free citizens are not exactly marked by their desire to please government authorities or being dependent on state programs. Nor is liberty positively promoted when the citizens focus mostly on play, getting the best toys (from cars to computers to vacations) in life, or seeking rewards from upper classes or government officers.

Obviously order and cooperation are desirable shared values in a society; but there is a huge difference between free citizens who have a significant say in establishing the rules and dependent citizens who are hardly involved in governance.

One of the great heroic roles in our modern culture is found in elementary teachers who work, serve and sacrifice to help to raise the next generation. For example, 63% of public grade-school teachers spend their own money buying food for at

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least one hungry student each month.<sup>1</sup>

This amazing statistic shows much of what is right, and wrong, with modern America. The [individual voluntarism and selfless service](#) by such teachers is a foundation of freedom. When parents don't own their responsibility to care for their children (which is the case in at least some, perhaps many, of these cases), our moral imperatives demand that we must. And when adults act like children, the state steps forward to feed and care for them.

Think of the great freedom cultures of history—from the Hebrew and Greek golden ages to the free Saracens, Swiss, English and early Americans, among others. These citizens were not dependents and not particularly interested in pleasing the authorities. In fact, they held the government dependent on the people and required government officials to please the citizens. They made [family](#) and work the center of adult life, as opposed to the “bread and circuses” of Elementary Cultures in Rome and other less-than-free societies.

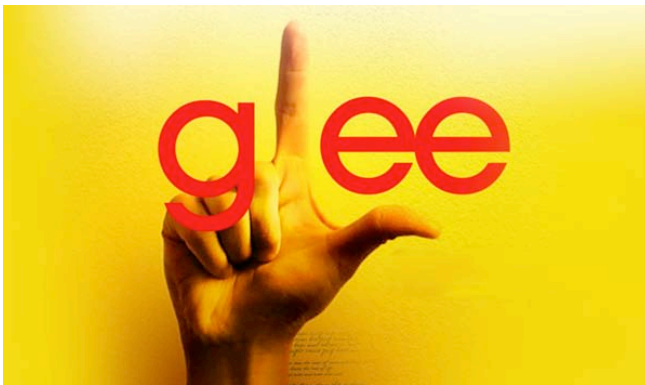
## High School Culture

Some adults live more in a High School Culture which, like Elementary Culture, does not promote free society. High School Culture generally values the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Source: “Harper’s Index,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2010.

- Fitting in
- Popularity
- Sports
- Cliques
- Class systems
- Disconnection from adult society



Sometimes even some of the teachers side or identify with certain cliques and basically join this culture. The currently popular television series “Glee” typifies this sort of class system. When applied to adult society, this creates a culture that hardly deserves and never maintains freedom. In many towns, for example, high school glory days represent all that is right and good, and success in sports is seen as success in life.

There are three major types of life success in High School Culture: 1) doing well in school and sports, 2) raising children who do well in school and sports, and 3) having grandchildren who are succeeding in school and sports. This is High School Culture indeed. In fact, in many places the activities of the local high school are the actual center and high point of culture and activity.

This happens in many traditionally conservative cultures such as many small and mid-size towns, much of the American West, Texas and the plains states, and also in traditionally liberal populations like in the South, the Appalachians and the Midwest. Whatever they call themselves politically, the dominant culture in such places often centers on the high school and reflects high school values. Adults living High School Culture focus on their local and private issues and hope to ignore political society until it forces itself into their lives. At such times, the typical response is anger and rebellion.

Unfortunately for freedom, seeking to fit in, be popular, join the best clique and thereby win the caste battle, and stay as disconnected from politics as possible, do not tend to promote free society. Whether or not these things are good for youth is arguable. But they are certainly not foundations of liberty or the ideal goals of free adults.

## **College-Corporate Culture**

Nor is College-Corporate Culture naturally supportive of freedom. Just as high school usually has more freedoms than elementary, college and work culture sometimes feels free in comparison to high school society. College-Corporate Culture is usually more dominant in bigger cities than in small towns, though of course there are people from all cultures living almost everywhere. College-Corporate Culture values the following:

- Personal success
- Career preparation and advancement

- Non-committal relationships
- Entertainment
- Status
- Pursuing individual interests
- Spending on lifestyle

People and places which adopt College-Corporate values experience more personal freedom than citizens living elementary or high school lifestyles. But they are unable to establish or maintain freedom on the large scale over time, and they are usually not interested in trying. “Me” and “I” dominate the perspectives of Elementary, High School and College-Corporate Cultures.

## Official Culture

In elementary and high schools there are principals, administrators, teachers and other officials who take care of the little people. In the adult lives that mirror grade and high schools, regular citizens see themselves as being taken care of by officials and the officers see themselves as taking care of the people. Since they value class systems and popularity, the people tend to regularly give in to those they consider in charge. Many even feel resentment towards those who seem to rebel against the (“adult”) officials. Woodstockers, John Birchers, the “-ism” extremists and other “rebels” are seen like druggies, gangsters and other unsavory high school cliques. The “good” kids don’t fight the system.

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College, university and corporate officials are often seen as distant, professionally rather than personally interested, upper class, and probably self-serving. “They ignore us, and we ignore them,” is the operating principle of the regular people. “We’re too busy pursuing our own success and fun to worry about them anyway—except to impress them.” The officers, in contrast, see the regular people as functionaries to help them achieve big goals and successes.

Official Culture values the following:

- Respect of those in authority
- People following the rules
- The infallibility of the rules
- The need to lead significant, bold change
- Overcoming the roadblocks which the regular people naively call “freedom”
- Keeping the system strong
- Promoting support and respect for the system
- Really helping the people
- Giving the people what they really need, even if they “think” they don’t want it or understand how much they need it



These have little likelihood of promoting long-term freedom.

Note that the official value of really helping the people is nearly always truly sincere. They really mean it. While some may consider this patronizing, like the *noblesse oblige* of upper classes, we can still admire those who genuinely seek to serve and help people.

For freedom to succeed, however, the majority of the people must move beyond being cared for by experts and instead adopt and live in Adult Culture. Freedom is lost in cultures dominated by Official Culture. For that matter, freedom cannot survive in a society run by Elementary, High School, College-Corporate and/or Official values and systems.

## Adult Culture

As mentioned above, freedom is incredibly rare in history. It occurs only with an extremely [high cost in resources, blood, sacrifice and wisdom](#), and it is maintained only when the citizenry does its job of truly leading the nation. Regular people must understand what is going on at the same or a higher level than government leaders, or the leaders become an upper class and the people are relegated to following child-like as [submissives and dependents](#).

To elect and become the right leaders and support the right direction in government, the people must study, watch, analyze and deeply think. They must study and understand the principles of freedom, and they must get involved to ensure that these principles are applied.

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Adult Culture values those things which keep societies free, prosperous and happy. Such values include the following:

- [Being your genuine self](#) and therefore not easily swayed by peers, experts or anyone else
- Actively and voluntarily contributing to society's needs
- Accepting responsibility for society and its future
- Appropriately and maturely making a positive difference in the world
- Accepting others for who they are and respecting their contributions
- [Spending wisely](#) and balancing it with proper savings and investment
- Consistently saving and effectively investing for the future
- Dedicating yourself to committed relationships
- Helping the young learn and progress
- Providing principled and effective assistance to those in need
- Influencing the rules, policies and laws to be what they should be, changing bad ones, and following the good ones
- [Sacrificing yourself](#) for more important things
- [Taking risks](#) when they are right
- Respecting those in authority, earning and expecting their respect in return, and holding them accountable to their proper roles and duties



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- Balancing relationships and work with appropriate leisure, entertainments, sports, toys, hobbies and/or relaxation
  - Openly discouraging and, if needed, [fighting class systems](#) and unprincipled/unjust inequalities
  - Helping influence positive change while keeping the things which are positively working
  - Never allowing “progress” to trample freedoms
  - Promoting support for and respect of the system as long as it is positive and improving
  - Really, sincerely helping the people while respecting them as adults, individuals and citizens worthy of admiration and esteem

Any move away from these adult values is a step toward less freedom. And let’s be clear: Most people naturally want to be treated like adults. For example, there are now more independents than Republicans or Democrats in part because the political parties so often seem to exhibit elementary and high school values.

Populist movements nearly always arise when governments seem to adopt Official Culture. The anti-Washington populism which swept President Obama into office was largely a response to perceived officiousness by President Bush and Vice President Cheney, just as [Tea Party populism](#) arose when many felt that the Obama Administration was [treating regular Americans like inferiors](#).

Any sense of arrogance, superiority, smugness or overwhelming and unresponsive mandate by political leaders quite predictably spurs frustrated reactions. Both parties routinely fall short in this arena, however, as do many in non-public sectors. All of us would do well to guard ourselves against pride, which is perhaps the most negative High School value.

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When combined with the harmful College-Corporate values of pushy ambition and myopic self-centeredness, pride wreaks havoc on societal leadership, prosperity and freedom. Instead, adult societies value relaxed confidence, poise, genuine humility, and authentic strength.

Adult Culture benefits from such values as elementary sharing and playing, high school enthusiasm and idealism, college self-improvement and dedicated learning, corporate hard work and excellence, and official emphasis on the rule of law and authentic caring for others. However, each of these is optimized and put in context in an Adult society—the only culture which can build and retain lasting freedom.

## The Hidden War

Sadly, High School and College Culture have created a war brewing between the generations. This is not a generation gap or a simple matter of the old not understanding the young. It is an actual financial war between today's children and their parents and grandparents. But the youth aren't engaged—they are simply the victims. For example, as *The Economist* wrote of Britain: "Half the population are under 40 years old but they hold only about 15% of all financial assets. People under 44 own, again, just 15% of owner-occupied housing....If pensions are counted, the situation is even more skewed."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Source: "Clash of Generations," a review of *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took their Children's Future—and Why They Should Give it Back*, by David Willetts, *The Economist*, February 13, 2010.

In the same article, entitled “Clash of Generations,” *The Economist* cites Member of Parliament David Willetts in his concern about the growing financial abuse of the young by older generations. After noting the wealth of the baby-boomer generation, the article says:

“Young people have little chance of building up similar wealth. They are struggling to get on the housing ladder, though close to a fifth of the people between 49 and 59 years old own a second home....”

“On top of this, older baby-boomers have dodged two speeding bullets, leaving their descendents squarely in the line of fire. The first is the bill for bailing out the financial sector; the second, the effect of climate change on the cost of energy, water, flood-prevention and the like.”

Former Reagan speech writer Peggy Noonan wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*:

“And there are the moral implications of the debt, which have so roused the tea party movement: The old vote themselves benefits that their children will have to pay for. What kind of people do that?”<sup>3</sup>

Certainly not those with adult values. As *The Economist* put it:

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<sup>3</sup> Source: Peggy Noonan, [“Can Washington Meet the Demand to Cut Spending?”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2010.

“There is an unvoiced contract that binds the generations. Parents look after their children, with a view to helping them do at least as well as they themselves have done, and grown-up children look after their parents, in the hope that their children will do the same for them one day. But there is now a ‘breakdown in the balance between the generations....’

“Mr. Willetts cites, approvingly, the way some American Indian tribal councils used to take decisions in the light of how they would affect the next several generations. In Britain, alas, it is painfully hard to see beyond the next election.”

The same problems are widespread in the United States. The tribal approach mentioned clearly comes from a society with adult values, unlike the philosophy guiding much of Anglo-American financial policy.

## **No Chewing Gum!**

Besides self-centeredness, another high school value is that the “good” people always follow the officials. John Dewey taught that the most lasting lessons learned in schools are the non-academic cultural values taught. While it has been

famously said that all one ever needs to know he learns in Kindergarten,<sup>4</sup> one lesson which seems to have most taken hold is that the teacher (or president, expert or agent) is always right. This falsehood has always been the end of freedom.

Consider how recessionary times impacted the current generation of youth (ages 15-29) raised with jobs as the central goals of their life. They know how to stay in line, not chew gum in class, stick to their social clique, and leave decision-making to the officials. But not only have innovation and leadership not been highly rewarded in their young lives, they are alien to most of them. Speaking of the current generation of college graduates, the experts have written:

“You’d think if people are more individualistic, they’d be more independent. But it’s not really true. There’s an element of entitlement—they expect people to figure things out for them.”

In the workplace, they “need almost constant direction....Many flounder without precise guidelines but thrive in structured situations that provide clearly defined rules.”

“This is a group that’s done resume building since middle school. They’ve been told they’ve been preparing to go out and do great things after college. And now they’ve been dealt a 180 [by high unemployment rates].”

“Trained through childhood to disconnect performance from reward, and told repeatedly that they are destined for

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Fulghum, *Everything I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*



great things, many are quick to place blame elsewhere when something goes wrong, and inclined to believe that bad situations will...be sorted out by parents or other helpers.”

“All of these characteristics are worrisome, given a harsh economic environment that requires perseverance, adaptability, humility, and entrepreneurialism.”<sup>5</sup>

A generation of assembly-line education has failed to prepare today’s youth for the real world. The simple solution for the generation now between ages 15 and 29, and for a lot of other people, is more jobs. This requires more [entrepreneurial action](#).



As Don Peck wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Ultimately, innovation is what allows an economy to grow quickly and create new jobs as old ones obsolesce and disappear.” Entrepreneurship requires adult values, not people full of high-school risk aversion and dependence.

Today we need a drastic return to the adult values in our society. Insecurely seeking to fit in, searching for popularity, sports and toys as measures of success, dependency on government and officials, class systems, pleasing those in charge, waiting for others to structure your success, feeling entitled, thinking your resume should create success,

<sup>5</sup> Source: Don Peck, “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America,” *The Atlantic*, March 2010

expecting a lottery or reality TV show to bail you out, and blaming others when things go wrong—these are not things free people cherish.

The question for our generation is: Can we regain our freedoms without putting aside childish things and becoming a society of adults?

## About the Author



Oliver DeMille is the founder and former president of [George Wythe University](#), a founding partner of [The Center for Social Leadership](#), and the author of [A Thomas Jefferson Education](#). Presently, he serves as a mentor directing graduate and doctoral programs and devotes a majority of his time to writing. Oliver is a popular keynote speaker, writer and business consultant. He is married to the former Rachel Pinegar. They have eight children.

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