



We Become What We Practice



ULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS INFLUENCE the way we see the world. I became delightfully aware of such assumptions during the three summers that I led tours through cliff dwellings in the Southwest. The most frequent comment visitors made when they first entered the long-abandoned town was, "Look at the size of those doors. The people must have been tiny." Most of the doors are only two feet tall. The tallest doors are four feet. The stone buildings themselves are only four to five feet tall so the conclusion that the people were tiny seems logical. And yet the skeletons found near the town indicate a stature that is average for people in the world today: a few inches smaller than the average American, but definitely not tiny. What assumptions led our conclusion astray?

One assumption is that all of these buildings are homes. When we think of people living in a town, we think of our own neighborhoods. Almost all of the buildings in our own neighborhoods are houses or apartments. When we think of our neighborhoods with our houses and our pantries full of food, we often forget about the large buildings we enter every week to replenish our food supply. And hundreds of miles beyond our neighborhoods are huge buildings: food-processing factories, twenty-story grain elevators, and ten-million-bushel warehouses. The concentration of houses in our neighborhoods would be impossible without those remote buildings and the trucks and trains that link us to them. In the cliff dwelling, all of this is contained in one "town." The majority of buildings are not houses but "warehouses" in which were stored a year's supply of food for a hundred people.

This concentration of corn, squash, beans, and nuts had to be protected from mice. In fact, towns are impossible if people cannot solve the mice problem. Small doors are one solution. The smaller the opening, the more reliably one can completely seal off a room so that the food within will still be there if a drought withers next year's crop.

A second assumption of ours is that doors must be large enough to pass through easily. We live within many rooms. Doorways are something we pass through many times a day, so we build them large. But these rooms sit within a great stone alcove within a massive, sandstone cliff. The alcove itself forms a great stone room arching four hundred and fifty feet over the town.

During the hot days of the overhead summer sun, the alcove keeps the town in cool, pleasant shade. The low winter sun, however, shines into the alcove and warms the town. I've sat bareskinned in the town when snow lay in the canyon beyond. During a thunderstorm, a waterfall plunges in front of the alcove while the town remains completely dry behind it. Swifts and ravens circle and swoosh through the alcove. Canyon wrens forage within it, filling the town with their melodic glissades. The shape of the alcove focuses sound like a great ear. When I sit quietly, I can hear the spring trickling and birds scratching in the oak leaves a hundred yards away.

Why spend the day in small, smoke-blackened rooms when one lives within the alcove's incredible space? The people who lived here probably spent most of their time outdoors on top of the level roofs. What we see only as flat rooftops are also the level floors of the main living spaces. Most of the rooms were for food; the roofs were for people. People passed through doors only occasionally. The smoke-blackened living rooms were probably used only on colder winter nights. If the most important function of a living room is to hold a fire's heat against the freezing night outside, then a small door makes sense. A smaller door is easier to seal against the cold just as it is easier to seal against the mice.

Assumptions that are logical within our culture obscure our understanding of this other culture. What was it really like to be one of these people? This question surfaces each time I visit this place. Little things trigger reveries of thought and wonder—such as a piece of abalone shell.

It was just a fragment of the shell, smoothed into an ornamental shape with a hole drilled through it, perhaps part of a necklace. But abalone? Here in the arid canyon country of the Southwest? The Pacific Ocean is five hundred miles away with the Mojave Desert in between. Did a traveler bring it all the way to this town? Or was it passed from hand to hand, from culture to culture? Was a single abalone shell cut into smaller and smaller pieces and gradually dispersed over the Southwest? If so, what stories accompanied this shell and were fragmented along with it?

Have you played the game where a message is passed along a line of people and by the end, the message is completely different? Perhaps that happened as each giver of the shell passed on the story of this beautiful thing. How would a desert dweller pass on to another desert dweller stories of water stretching to the horizon? How would the ceaseless pounding of the surf be understood by people living near tiny, trickling springs? How would a beach—wet sand without trees—be understood in a region where wet sand always brings forth cottonwoods and willows? Surely these canyonlands created assumptions in the minds of their inhabitants.

According to anthropologists, these people were the descendants of a migration that left the Old World at least ten thousand years ago. That migration occurred before people in the Old World began agriculture, formed cities, developed the wheel, used metal, and evolved writing. The things that we associate with civilization developed after this migration of people left and settled North and South America. This migration of people went on to develop civilization in the New World but the most basic assumptions underlying their civilization might be different from ours.

One archaeologist, for example, wonders whether we use the wrong assumption when we label as “trade” the movement of materials between regions. In the Americas, it may have been gift-giving. Each region has resources that are scarce in other regions. Bringing these resources as gifts helps maintain an open hospitality to travelers. The resulting distribution of resources resembles trade, yet the assumptions and feelings underlying that distribution could have been very different.

Another archaeologist assumes that a stick across the doorway meant “No one home.” How different a stick is from a steel deadbolt lock! How different might have been their sense of property. Most of our property is mass-produced and difficult to identify. Yet in a culture where each item is individually and uniquely crafted, the identity of the few pieces of

property would be known by all. Stealing and trust would be different in this stone town.

Was the town noisy? Perhaps, with a hundred people living so closely together. On the other hand, the acoustics of the alcove carry sound so well that, within an hour, the people on my tours were talking much more quietly than normal. How loudly did the original inhabitants talk?

People on my tours sometimes noticed how straight the walls stood. "All their walls are so straight. They must have been good builders." That conclusion seemed simple and safe until one day I realized, "Not necessarily." Gravity is constantly pulling down on things. Walls that were not straight have fallen. The only walls remaining are the straight walls. We see a skewed sample. We see their building craft at its best.

Ancient corncobs lying about the ruin are only a few inches long. How was farming different when your corn was that small? Some archaeologists suggest that the most important crops were the deer, squirrels, and rabbits that the garden lured within range of the gardening hunters.

Skeletal remains indicate that the average life span of these people was about thirty-five years. Most of us live our lives assuming that death is far in the future. How is life different when you expect to live only thirty-five years? How would this affect childhood, learning, marriage? We prevent our children from even holding a job or voting until their late teens. What was the maturity level of their teenagers?

I came to appreciate these cliff dwellings for the perspective they gave me on my own mind and culture. They allowed me to detect a multitude of assumptions that had been unconscious before. Yet the more assumptions I uncovered, the more inaccessible these canyon dwellers became. Who were these people? I desired a more human bond than the animal basics of birth, food, and death.



Two stairways ascend the steep, rock slope to the stone village. The stairway that the tour follows goes straight up the slope. Its steps are two feet across and hewn deep into the stone. The gashes of steel chisels are fresh and easily visible. The National Park Service cut these steps so we could visit the town.

Off to the side is the almost invisible, original stairway into the town. The rounded steps are only a few inches deep. That is partly because they are worn down by use and time. Yet the steps are also only a few

inches wide, wide enough for just one foot. In fact, the steps alternate: right, left, right, left. You have to start on the right foot to enter the town. This hand-and-toehold trail follows the flow of the rock, avoiding the steep areas, seeking the sections gradual enough not to need steps.

The cliff dwellers did not have metal. They had to pound with antler or harder rock. Carving a step was harder for them and required much more time. The step-makers minimized their labor by following the flow of the slope and carving only what was needed.

Some visitors could not climb even our broad, steel-carved steps. Almost all visitors, seeing the ancient stairs, thought climbing them was impossible, but the original dwellers, as children, would have seen the grown-ups going up and down the stairs. In fact, a baby might have gone up and down that hand-and-toehold trail on the back of a parent. A child would never have thought those stairs were impossible. Instead, those stairs posed a challenge. Solving that challenge gave a child the freedom to leave the town and explore the forested canyon beyond. Children would practice and look forward to the day when they could climb out of town just as our youth look forward to the day when they can drive out of the driveway.

In one cliff dwellings' plaza, where the women gathered to share their work, is a rock. It stands only two feet high with gently sloping sides. Any child could easily jump on top of it. Yet carved into the side are tiny hand-and-toeholds, closely spaced together—a playground for the crawlers and toddlers. Under the watchful eyes of the older generation, the babies practiced the skills they would need.

In the villages of the Hopis (the descendants of these people), I watch kids scramble up straight stone walls to get onto the roofs for a better view of the dances. If a child has to run all the way around the house to use the ladder, she won't get a front row seat. They will already be taken.

But stone steps are not part of our culture. There are no tiny hand-and-toehold trails in our playgrounds. Rock climbing is not required to leave our towns. And so when we encounter these steps, they seem impossible. Only wilderness travelers know how easy those steps really are—at least for those who practice walking on steep rock.

On the other hand, those canyon dwellers probably would have found it impossible to handle a world rushing toward them at fifty-five miles per hour. To us, it seems natural, because we have been practicing ever since we were driven home as newborns from the hospital delivery room. But my mother once drove around town with a man who had been in

prison for years. He grew nervous when she drove more than twenty-five miles per hour. The world was moving too fast. He was out of practice.

The stone steps taught me that we become what we practice. The skills we practice with our bodies and the assumptions we practice in our minds shape us. Practice allows humans to create different cultures for different environments and different times. Practice allows humans to diverge. These canyon dwellers and I share the ability to adapt to different environments. The maze of assumptions separating me from those people is actually my most human bond with them.