

The Decline and Fall of the Neighborhood Drugstore

THE NEIGHBORHOOD PHARMACY, SOME EIGHT DECADES AGO, WAS THE cornerstone of the urban community; and when all else failed (as did so many retail enterprises in the Depression year of 1933, including the local bank), the pharmacy—called the corner drugstore—stood as a fortress against all adversity, a steadfast reminder that some things in life do not change. Other retail stores, the survivors of the economic decline, occupied sundry positions on the street but the corner, approachable from two streets, seemed to have been expressly reserved for the drugstore (in 1933, the word, drug, carried a more restricted, more benevolent meaning).

The functions of the neighborhood drugstore were at least five in number: First, to fill all of the prescriptions, written in strange Latin abbreviations, brought with trembling hands by neighborhood people. Second, to provide answers to profound questions about the intimate details of health and disease; (it should be remembered that the pharmacist was always called, “Doc.”) Third, to provide, in stealth, medically-related items to selected adults, but only those who were trustworthy, items such as condoms or spermicidal douches. Fourth, to offer access to a public telephone booth within the drugstore for the neighborhood community, most of whom were without home-based telephones. And lastly, to provide a congenial meeting place for the neighborhood youth, a joyous venue called the drugstore counter where young people might convene for such spirited endeavors as sharing an ice-cream soda or banana-split. It was a convenient venue before the roadside taverns had been invented.

The drugstore created a mutually appreciated geographic locus for the community. When one uttered, “Meet me at the drugstore,” there was no ambiguity, no doubt as to where the meeting should take place.

The drugstore, then, was much more than a mercantile contrivance for pharmaceuticals. In a time of instability, the drugstore remained a stable entity, the community’s emotional center. The drugstore was, in the words of Marcus Aurelius 121 – 180, CE), “Like a promontory of the sea, against which, though the waves beat continually, yet it both itself stands, and about it are those swelling waves stilled and quieted.” It was an intensely important community resource that offered life-saving medications, common hygienic products, carbonated drinks; and most of all, earnest advice.

And the role of the pharmacist (then called the druggist)? The druggist—almost all were middle-aged males—was college-educated with a prominently displayed diploma suspended above the counter. Typically, he was bilingual; speaking Italian in Italian-speaking neighborhoods; and in the Jewish neighborhoods, a vernacular Yiddish.

The nature of street-level mercantilism has changed drastically since World War II. Stores, that had once confined themselves to a narrowly defined domain of the retail market, have now expanded indiscriminately, invading the precincts of other retail stores. And thus the butcher shop sells fruits and vegetables as well as meat; the former candy store has become an emporium

vending everything from nostrums to containers of milk; and the drugstore, no longer identifying itself as the neighborhood pharmacy, has foresworn its role as the intimate neighborhood drugstore and has lost its human identity becoming but one of many nationwide department stores selling everything imaginable from cosmetics to artisanal wines to Christmas trees; and, incidentally, prescription-based pharmaceuticals.

And the soda counters of the old drug stores, selling alcohol-free fluids to youngsters newly learning the time-worn intricacies of social dating? The counters with their circular stools, have largely disappeared, while the social behavior of the late-adolescent population has similarly been transfigured in ways not fully understood.

Nostalgia for the “old neighborhood stores,” quaint perhaps in their rotogravure reminiscences, is merely another subterfuge for a reluctance to accept the fundamental changes that have transformed the world of retail commerce. The Mom and Pop stores, embellished and preserved in fiction, have been replaced by transnational enterprises repeated endlessly in American shopping malls and in countless urban centers of the world. Citizens of Moscow and many other global villages now know Macdonald’s as well as do the children of the Kansas prairies.

Both the retail establishments of America and even its language have become global. There is a current story of a tourist from New York visiting China. She feels isolated as she travels in a Chinese train. In her reveries, she sneezes; and a stranger sitting next to her exclaims, “Gesundheit!” And the woman replies: “Oh, I’m so happy to hear English spoken!”

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The author and his spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

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