

Who's Minding the Store?

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Seventy-five years ago it was common, in rural areas, to have a general store serving the needs of the community. Typically, the store was owned and operated by a husband and wife who knew each of their customers. The general store stocked basic goods that farmers and villagers were unable to produce but it was more than a place to buy things. It was a meeting place where news could be shared or a letter mailed from the small post office in a back corner of the store. It was a place to visit with neighbours, to discuss the weather or the price of cattle or grain, or to display posters announcing local auction sales. In another corner of the store there might be a barber's chair surrounded by coils of fencing wire and a few kegs of nails.

Most of the produce would be stored on shelves behind wooden counters appearing to separate the storekeeper from the customer. These stores were not the current self-serve variety. In fact, the wooden counter produced the opposite effect. To purchase anything the customer enjoyed the full attention of the storekeeper.

But the storekeeper did more than simply receive money from the customers. He, or she, needed to have in mind the specific needs of the customers. In March, it was important to have an adequate supply of wire and fencing staples so farmers could repair the winter damage. In late August, the prudent storekeeper stocked up on pencils, a few rulers and scribblers, and some children's shoes, since the summer of barefooted freedom was drawing to a close. As November approached, it was wise to have a few extra pairs of long underwear for sale. In other words, the successful "minder of the store" had to look ahead and anticipate the community's needs.

Now I invite you to imagine a larger store existing in our present time. This store is really huge. It is called the “global” store. Instead of serving a small rural community, it serves everyone on this planet earth. The global store has vast quantities of goods within it. It contains a lot of fresh water, though not as much as it had seventy-five years ago. It has clean air, though in Southwestern Ontario not as much as in the rest of our province. The global store has lots of natural resources, though fewer than it had decades ago. The global store has over seven billion customers and the number is increasing daily. Every day all of them come to shop because there is only one such store. Although it is the only store, it is quite convenient. It serves so many people that we don’t get to know everyone who takes supplies from it. But some people think that’s good. We get what we want, and we don’t take time to listen to other people’s problems.

Actually, we have *more* of some things than we used to have. We have more global warming. This addition contributes to more erratic weather patterns, including more floods and more droughts as well as deserts in more countries than previously. Today, one person out of every seven is undernourished. We still have quite a few international agreements to help seven billion people get along but now we have more unilateral action and more wars than previously. In fact, the most powerful countries are working unilaterally to shape the rest of the world in their own image. Other unilateral actions include rejection of land mine treaties, rejection of World Court decisions and refusal to agree to the rejection of atomic bombs as first strike weapons.

So the question arises as to who is minding the global store? Where are our leaders who will think in global terms? I have come to believe that responsibility for the global store rests on our own shoulders. The problems of our world, whether war, poverty, starvation, pollution, over-population, illiteracy, or lack of health care emerge as our own human-made problems. In the end, these problems must be dealt with by our own human-made solutions, including a generous and caring world view. While a global pandemic such as COVID-19 may divide countries from each other, it is ironic that the solution to such global problems may require co-operation among our global neighbors.