

**November 18, 2011**

***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

**The increasingly flat world we live in.** Have you been paying attention? The world we live in—particularly in these first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—has become, increasingly, a flatter world.

With the advent of globalization, coupled with the incredible advances in information technology (IT), from virtually any part of the planet—if you have a cell phone—you have access like never before. This access—to the global system of interconnected computer networks that is the internet and to the World Wide Web (a service that runs on the internet)—is leveling the playing field in dramatic fashion.

This new, *flatter* world is having a democratizing effect across the globe. Everywhere, increasing numbers of people can connect, compete and collaborate with more different people, from more places, for less money and with greater ease than ever before. It’s staggering, mind-boggling.

According to Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum in a new book, *That Used To Be Us* (just released), all of this ferment in communication and technology is due to *three powerful forces that came together between the late 1980s and the new millennium.*

The first was the personal computer, which enabled more people to create their own content (words, books, programs, photos, data, music, applications, videos etc.) in digital form (which means it could be manipulated in many more ways).

Secondly, with the advent of the internet and World Wide Web, people now had the ability to send their digital content to countless more places where it could be shared and worked on by more people for incredibly low costs.

And thirdly, a quiet revolution in software programming and transmission—a sort of *workflow* revolution—that made everyone’s technological apparatus interoperable with everyone else’s.

Specifically, according to Friedman and Mandelbaum, it is the convergence of these three forces that have remarkably *flattened* the modern world we live in.

**Implications of a flatter world.** Let me say, up front, that I am not good at technology and I struggle to understand high-tech language along with the cyberspace world it alludes to. Having said that, what appeals to me in this *new world* is the egalitarian effect it is having on the approximately seven billion people on the planet.

It is stunningly amazing that a person in rural India, for example, or a person in some remote area of Russia or China can so easily find anything or anyone—to collaborate to

make products, share information and even, as in the recent uprisings in the *Arab spring*, to organize revolutions.

As Craig Mundie, Chief Strategy and Research Officer for Microsoft, says: *The people now have not only their own information access system to understand what is going on better inside their own countries or abroad, not only to discuss that with one another, but also the command-and-control mechanism to organize themselves to do something about it.*

Friedman and Mandelbaum add, *In the past, only governments and armies had these kinds of high-scale command-and-control systems. Now the people do.*

Part of what this means is that nothing is *local* anymore. Any news or insight or *new thing* of whatever kind can now travel, immediately, from the most remote corners of any country onto this global platform where it gets shared.

The possibilities for education, learning and innovation are almost unimaginable, to say nothing of the prospects for new business opportunities where all you need is one person with a creative idea. Access in this new, *flatter* world makes potential success available to almost anyone.

What is more, it creates a near infinity of new possibilities for any person to *jump in* and improve their life-situation in the world. This *democratization* impact on the world cannot be over estimated. For sure, there will be the usual problems with oversight and the lower impulses of some to ruin things for the majority. Still, in this increasingly *flat* world we live in, there's more than a little cause for optimism and hope.