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Q&A: Richard Florida

Why where we live can be as important as whom we marry

By *Bret Schulte*

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The world is not flat, says Richard Florida, contrary to the bestselling book by *New York Times* writer Thomas Friedman. Florida, author of his own bestselling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and a professor of business and creativity at the University of Toronto, argues that while Friedman is correct in saying that technology has reshaped the world, it has not created a level playing field. With newly accumulated data to back him up, Florida argues in his upcoming book *Who's Your City?* that the world is, in many ways, spiky—with population, opportunity, innovation, and money increasingly coalescing in metropolitan areas worldwide. That means pursuing a career and staying close to family and friends are often at odds. Deciding what makes you happy, he argues, must go hand in hand with deciding where you want to live. Recently, Florida spoke with *U.S. News*. Excerpts:

What makes Friedman wrong?

I had this intuitive sense that the world wasn't flat. I kind of knew that globalization was pulled between these two forces: one that spreads out, like factories, and the other, this compelling fact that 50 percent of people live in urban places. We found that distribution of economic activity is even more concentrated than distribution of population. Then we got data from the U.S. Patent Office that showed where inventors are located, and then we combined that with data from the world. We looked at distributions of innovations; they are even more concentrated. So, in a sense, as you go up the ladder, the world got more and more concentrated. Then this idea came to me that the world is not flat. It's spiky. That's not to say that Tom Friedman is wrong. I think he gets about half the equation right. A lot of things in the world's economy can be decentralized, but my hunch is those are not the central thing to the world economy. The most important dimensions of the world's economy continue to concentrate.

If we can fly anywhere, call anywhere, videoconference anywhere, why is place so important?

Innovative people cluster together. When we do that we increase each other's productivity. A group of researchers at the Santa Fe Institute call it an "urban metabolism." As our cities grow

they get faster and faster, better and better, more and more innovative. Some don't, and they die. That's why economic activity spikes, because of these conglomerations of energy and talent. Jack White left Detroit where he created the sound of the White Stripes to be part of the music conglomeration of Nashville.

What does this mean for the economy?

The spikes of economic activity are spreading out. It's not China we're competing with, it's Shanghai. It's not India we're competing with, it's Bangalore. These countries are even spikier than the U.S. and Europe.

In the book, you worry about the places that aren't spiking.

The spikes are growing so high they're leaving the valleys behind. We don't have a North-South conflict. It's the world's peaks versus the world's valleys, and that frankly bothers me.

You go so far as to call the spiky world "tricky and even treacherous."

Right. We can see it in this election. It's really giving rise to class conflict. We are starting to see a backlash against cities, and a backlash against people who live in them. Urban conglomerations are the single most important thing to our competitiveness, yet people won't talk about it. And the second thing that worries me is we're unable to talk about those being left behind. We're stuck in a stalemate. I would like to see everyone live better.

So, how does all this relate to happiness?

The point of the book is to help people make better decisions. You have to understand that economic activity isn't spread out. So there's a trade-off we have to make between furthering our career and finding a lifestyle that fits us. Being economically mobile can mean you sacrifice all the rootedness in family relations.

How do we make the best decision?

We said calculators and quizzes only take you so far. So we said we're going to give you a 10-point list on how to place yourself. We say you have to go talk to the people who live in a place, and you have to go visit. If you don't you're bound to be disappointed. Correcting the wrong place decision is on the border of correcting a wrong relationship decision or employment decision. So you have to be careful about it.

What factors matter most?

You have to say, "My career means this much to me; my lifestyle means this much to me. I'm married with kids; I have to find schools. I'm young and single, and I need to find partners." You have to balance all that. The book tries to give you a sense of how to do that.

Do people realize their happiness is closely linked to place?

Absolutely not. People don't even think about it. But when you ask them you begin to discover their place is a critical contributor to their happiness. Generally speaking, place tends to the positive side of the happiness ledger. That was surprising to us. When we asked people about the source of stress in their life, place came in last. If you find a place that fits you, it gives you more energy. People have always been attracted to aesthetics. The other thing is infrastructure. Maybe you like to go outside, or ride your bike. Those things are critically important. What people are saying is they are not going to be fulfilled in a place that just has a good pipe system. They want to live in a place that gives them excitement and energy.

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