



The Power of Rural Life Stories

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THE RURAL PROBLEM IS NOT PRIMARILY ECONOMIC BUT CULTURAL. THE MOMENT that we took the word culture out of *agriculture* and substituted the word business, we began to get into the kind of trouble we are in now. Our culture resides primarily in the stories we tell, in stories about the nature, the habits, and the history of a people and a place. I want to tell several of my own stories as a way of remembering rural culture. I believe that the countryside can survive in no other way.

Let me begin, though, by observing there are two ways in which we kill our own stories even before they get started. One way is to say that this or that—say, nuclear war or the globalization of the economy or the demise of the family farm—is inevitable; but almost nothing is even predictable, much less inevitable. When one is told that something is inevitable, one is really being told that one must not think about it, ask questions about it, or dream of any alternative to it.

The other way in which stories get squelched before they even start, so that we fail to dream about the future we want, is to say about anything unusual, “but that’s not practical”; but no new idea was ever practical. There is no such thing, by

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Our stories are necessary for our survival. They provide us a home, a basis for judgment, a glimpse of alternative futures, and a reason to hope.

definition, as a new idea which is in the beginning practical. The present impracticality of an idea is completely irrelevant. The only relevant questions are: What would it take to make this new idea practical? And, does it seem worth the effort to try?

I. PLANT A GARDEN

A few years ago the Kansas visionary Wes Jackson spoke at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. After his talk a student raised a hand and said, "Mr. Jackson, could you suggest one substantial thing I could do to make the world a better place? Give me something real to do."

"Well yes," Jackson said, "I could. Go home and plant a garden."

I thought about that and wrote this story: What if one's life were not a commodity—not something to be bartered to the highest bidder or made to order? What if one's life were governed by needs more fundamental than acceptance or admiration? What if one were simply to go home and plant a garden? To plant a garden is to enter the continuum of time. Each seed carries in its genome the history that will propel it into the future. And in planting it, we stretch one of the long threads of our culture into tomorrow.

A home, like a garden, exists as much in time as in space. A home is a place in the present where one's past and one's future come together, the crossroads between history and heaven. I learned this truth the day we buried my mother.

In the previous month, I had often felt like a man without an anchor. My wife and I were living in St. Paul and expecting our first child. For my wife it was a difficult and somewhat dangerous pregnancy. Christmas passed and days turned toward the new year. The baby was overdue. In those same days, Mother was lying in a hospital bed in Montevideo, Minnesota, emaciated and in pain, dying of cancer. My own heart resided in both places, full of fear and hope, and at the same time I did not know where my body should be. On the penultimate day of the old year, the baby, after stubborn resistance of her own (which she has kept up, I might say parenthetically, for 23 years now) finally arrived. She was big and beautiful and healthy. She gave one lusty cry as she entered the world and then lay quietly while she was bathed and dressed, looking about the room in wide-eyed wonder.

I telephoned Mother with the news. She said with surprising energy that she hoped she might see the baby before she died. But that day a fierce cold front settled over Minnesota. For more than a week, daytime temperatures did not rise above zero. We were, as first-time parents always are, terrified of our responsibilities. The baby seemed so helpless and fragile. We did not dare to risk the three-hour drive to the hospital.

One cloudy morning in mid-January, the weather at last broke. We bundled up the baby and made a dash for Montevideo. In the darkened hospital room, we introduced grandmother and granddaughter. The baby slept against the rails of the bed while Mother fondled her with eyes too small for their bony sockets. They

joined hands—the baby’s soft, fat, and warm, Mother’s cold, gaunt, and hard. With tremendous effort, Mother whispered three words barely audible above the hum of the humidifier. “Is she healthy?” she asked. We wept because she was.

When we arrived back home the telephone was ringing. The nurse was on the line with the word, hardly news, that Mother had died. The weather was still bitter and gray the day we buried her in the little cemetery at St. John’s Lutheran Church. After the ceremony, the three children, Kathy, Paulette, and I, who felt strangely like children again that day, vulnerable and bewildered in an impossibly big world, took refuge one last time in the farm house where we had laughed and cried together and alone so many times.

We had meant to see to the household goods. There would not be many other opportunities for it. We lived a distance from one another and seldom found ourselves together. But almost the first items we came across were the photo albums. We sat in the living room then, not bothering to light the lamp, looking at the pictures and talking until the day died. “Do you remember when Mother turned around and looked into the back seat of the car and said, ‘Where’s your sister?’ And Paul said, ‘Oh she fell out a long time ago.’” And she had.

“Do you remember the day Mother told the neighbor she couldn’t go to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union because her wine was ready for bottling?”

“Do you remember the time when we floated a pound of butter in Mother’s hot laundry starch?”

“Do you remember?” “Do you remember?”

The stories tumbled as if out of an overstuffed closet. Sometimes we had three of them going at once. We laughed until we ached. I remember it now as one of the happiest afternoons of my life, the metamorphosis of a friendship deepening as the years passed and we three faced our own mortalities. I think I have never been more exactly at home, more tenaciously alive than that afternoon when old joy and new sorrow and present love reverberated together inside me.

All history is ultimately local and personal. To tell what we remember and to keep on telling it is to keep the past alive in the present. Should we not do so, we could not know, in the deepest sense, how to inhabit a place. To inhabit a place means literally to have made it a habit, to have made it a custom and ordinary practice of our lives, to have learned how to wear a place like a garment—like the garments of sanctity (the habits) that nuns once wore.

The word habit in its now dim original form meant “to own.” We own places not because we possess the deeds to them, but because they have entered the continuum of our lives. What is strange to us and unfamiliar can never be home.

II. RECOVERING NOSTALGIA

It is the fashion, just now, to disparage nostalgia. Nostalgia, we believe, is a chief emotion, but we forget what it means. In its Greek roots it means literally the return home. It came into currency as a medical word in nineteenth-century Ger-

many, to describe the failure to thrive of the displaced persons, including my own ancestors, who had crowded into that country from the east. Nostalgia is the clinical term for homesickness, for the desire to be rooted in a place, to know clearly what time it is. This desire need not imply the impulse to turn back the clock, which of course we cannot do. It recognizes rather the truth that, if home is a place in time, we cannot know where we are now unless we can remember where we have come from.

The real romantics are those who believe that history is the triumphal march of progress, that change is indiscriminately for the better. Those who would demythologize the past seem to forget that we also construct the present as a myth—that there is nothing in the wide universe so vast as our own ignorance. Knowing that is our one real hope.

So, the past matters. And to begin to construct a real future for ourselves involves remembering that past. But let me remind you what happens every time we do that. Suppose I say to you, “Do you remember the days we had threshing rigs in the countryside? Oh, there were lots of quarrels about who was going to be first in line for the threshing, and the work itself was hot and hard and dusty and noisy. And the women who slaved in the kitchen to make those fabulous meals were weary by the end of the season. But they were good times, too, at the threshing. There was always time after lunch to lie in the shade and talk. And there was a lot of laughter at threshing time. We were happy to see the season gone when it finally left, but a little sad, too. Life seemed a little lonelier when threshing season was over.”

Suppose I asked you, “What if we found ways to do work together again in our communities—work that mattered—instead of pursuing life, every individual for himself. Wouldn’t that be good for us?”

Or suppose I said, “Do you remember the way that lake on the edge of our town used to be? I’ve heard stories about how in the ’20s and ’30s it was a clear-water lake with a hard bottom and it produced lunker northerns and people came all the way from Chicago on the train to vacation here. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could have a clean lake in our town again—one you dared to go swimming in—one that produced fish you could consider eating? Wouldn’t that be a nice idea? I wonder what this would take?”

Or suppose I said to you, “Do you remember the days when our town had a school? Oh, I know we don’t have enough children now to have a school again. Maybe I’m dreaming a bit, but it did seem to me that when we had a school there was always something doing in the community. There was always a game in town or a theatrical production to attend or a band performance to hear. And when we had that school our children were really the pride of our town. When they had a success at something all of us reveled in it. It really helped to have the children at the heart of our community. What if we were to try to find ways to put children back into the center of our communities again? Wouldn’t that be a good idea?”

Or suppose I said to you, “Do you remember the days when towns built auditoriums like this one, when, even in little towns out in the middle of nowhere, we wanted to make things that were beautiful, just because they were beautiful; when we thought that was important to our lives? What do you suppose would happen if we wanted to make some public thing again that was really beautiful in the middle of our towns? Wouldn’t that help? Wouldn’t it at least raise our spirits?”

You know what automatic response I would get to any of those questions. Somebody would inevitably say, “Well, Paul, thank you for sharing, but that’s all just nostalgia. I wouldn’t want to go back to washing my clothes on a stone again. And I like indoor plumbing and automobiles.”

I might protest that I like washing machines and plumbing and cars, too, that I’m talking about values, not things. But it would be of no use. We’ve used the weapon of nostalgia to bludgeon the imagination out of our history.

III. ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

The reason such stories, such questions, matter is that they begin to give us the capacity to make moral judgments and to imagine alternative futures. When we remember our past, we remember things that we loved, we remember things that we hated, we remember values that have endured, we remember values that went astray, and thus we gain some ethical guidance for the future that we can’t get in any other way. But, we’re told over and over again that we may not have those stories. The world is inevitable. To think otherwise is not practical. You’re being romantic. Stop dreaming.

Let me tell you another story: Only a little more than a century ago, there lived in a township where I grew up, Rosewood Township, Chippewa County, Minnesota, a people who would stake their lives and fortunes upon the buffalo. The buffalo once flourished in seemingly inexhaustible numbers. There were perhaps 60 million of them. When Coronado, the first European to see the prairies, traveled to Kansas in 1541, a journey of several months, he reported that he was never once beyond sight of them.

If you were born into Plains culture those days, you were wrapped in swaddling clothes made from the soft skin of the buffalo calf and, until you could walk, carried in a cradle lined with the pulverized dung of a buffalo which served as a diaper. You grew into an adult life ever dependent upon the buffalo. It provided you with food, with raiments, with shelter, with tools, with household furnishings, with paints and dyes, with cosmetics, with fuel. And when you died, you were buried or raised upon a platform in a coffin made of a buffalo hide. The buffalo was literally the beginning and the end of your existence. You would have thought that the buffalo was eternal.

And then came we Europeans, whose railroad lines and fences and plows and relentless hunting reduced the buffalo nearly to extinction. This decimation threatened the survival of Plains culture as we knew. The United States Congress passed a

bill in the 1860s to protect the few hundred buffalo that still survived out of the tens of millions. President Grant vetoed it on the advice of his Secretary of War who said that to get rid of the buffalo was to get rid of the Indian problem. There arose then among the desperate Native Americans a shaman who said that the buffalo had not died, that they had merely gone down into the safety of the underworld. If the people, the shaman preached, would say the right prayers and perform the right dances, the buffalo would return and their way of life would be saved. So all across the prairies, the people danced and prayed. But Americans, despite their Constitution, outlawed this new aspect of native religions, the Ghost Dance, as it was called.

In South Dakota, in December 1890, a group of Lakota Sioux danced in defiance of that ban. When ordered to quit, they left their reservation and headed for the Badlands where they could dance and pray in peace. Along the way they were set upon by American cavalry and slaughtered, men, women, and children alike. The few survivors were carried to a nearby mission and laid out on the sanctuary floor to be treated for their wounds. Above the altar, hung for the Christmas season, was a banner reading, "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men." That place was Wounded Knee. This was the last battle of the long war. The buffalo were not, after all, eternal.

Today we have made, in places like Roseman Township, a culture as dependent upon corn as Sioux culture was upon the buffalo. A person born in our time will, as an infant, be clothed in a diaper made in part of corn and will be fed a formula based upon corn syrup. That person will grow into an adult life sustained in thousands of ways by products made from, packaged in, or manufactured with derivatives of corn, from every kind of food (except fresh fish) to plastics, textiles, building materials, machine parts, soaps and cosmetics, even highways. And when that person dies, the laws of our land require that the body should be embalmed in a fluid made in part from corn. We have not begun to imagine a life without corn. We have assumed by the default of failing to think about it that corn is eternal. But it is no more eternal than the buffalo. In fact, because all the corn we cultivate shares a common cytoplasm, one pathogen could easily devastate our culture as we know it.

If we look for inspiration to the world that our *God* has made rather than to the one *we* have made by our own cleverness, there we find that the efficiency of monosystems is not so much celebrated. The world of nature is a world of redundancy—over and over again. The world of nature is a world of diversity—over and over again. The story we are being offered as inevitable claims that just one of almost everything will be best. We are moving inexorably toward just one of everything. And unless we stop believing in the inevitability and goodness and efficiency of oneness, stop believing that singularity serves our ends and purposes, we will come to live under the rule of one, not in democracy, but in some totalitarian system. That's the real threat. It's not economic. It's political.

IV. DISPOSABLE COMMUNITIES

And one more story: Richard Lingeman, who wrote a history of small towns, calls our midwestern villages disposable communities.¹ He means that many of them did not emerge organically in places well suited for the development of towns. Instead, they were often real-estate speculations or the projects of railroads whose financial fortunes prospered whatever the fate of the towns they promoted. The geographer John C. Hudson found that more than half the railroad towns in North Dakota, for example, were by 1984 little more than neighborhood gathering points for local farmers with perhaps a gasoline station, a store, a post office, a tavern or two plus one or more grain elevators. Most merchants in the town disappeared so long ago that younger residents never knew their trade centers as any but a collection of decaying buildings. But the railroad network remains today much as it did 65 years ago. Railroad profit and losses never were tied closely to the economic fortunes of the town they served, even less so in later years when everything except grain moved on the highway.²

Our belief is, as Hudson puts it, that structure can be made to precede activity. This idea failed in the utopian communities of the nineteenth century. It failed in the disposable communities of the Plains. It failed in the urban housing projects of the 1950s and '60s. It failed in the new towns of the 1970s. And yet it persists. How many thousands of industrial parks have been built along the edges of dying towns in recent decades, their empty streets cracking and heaving from freeze to freeze, their vacant lots sprouting pigweed and cockleburrs? The idea that structure generates activity is a consequence of misapprehending technology, of regarding it not as a tool but as an end in itself.

Here are some other examples of this idea at work in our culture: We can improve education by consolidating schools. We can make highways safer by designing them for higher speeds. We can solve urban blight by razing the neighborhoods that the poor live in and replacing them with more expensive units. We can reintegrate rural communities by installing fiber optic links to the cities. We can reduce crime by building more prisons. The delusion in each of these instances is that individual or cultural behavior would change if only the right structure were in place.

The alternative is to think of entrepreneurial work as an option for our rural communities. I lived for fifteen happy years in Worthington, Minnesota, which bills itself as the turkey capital of the world. This is by now a sentimental label since there is not a turkey to be found in all of Nobles County. But the title once had some legitimacy. There was a thriving poultry industry in Worthington, fostered by two local hatchery men who enlisted the town's retailers and the Chamber of Commerce in an ingenious promotion. "Do your spring trade with us," they told the region's farmers—or more particularly the region's farm wives, because

¹Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620-The Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

²John C. Hudson, *Plains Country Towns* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985).

women took care of the poultry—“and we’ll give you a free chick for every dollar you spend.” It was no gimmick. Everybody benefited. Businesses saw more traffic. Farmers received both the chicks and the income for mature birds and the poultrymen eventually had a supply of chickens and turkeys for slaughter.

This scheme contributed to the establishment of the region around Worthington as the important national center of poultry production, a diversification that helped to pull the community through the dark years of the great depression. By the 1940s, the town had begun to celebrate turkeys in an annual harvest festival, sponsored by local merchants as a way of thanking their rural patrons.

The festival, which included a parade of turkeys, musical and carnival entertainment, and moonlight dancing in the street, was so great a success that presidential aspirants began to flock to it to make their big farm policy speeches. Estes Kefauver, Adlai Stevenson, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey all came. Humphrey liked to flatter the townsfolk by noting the only election he ever lost was one in which he skipped Turkey Day. Lyndon Johnson sulked because the sky dared to rain on him, and Robert Kennedy drew a cheering throng of 80,000, the largest crowd that Worthington or that region will ever see.

But disease eventually thinned the flocks and after the second world war farms expanded and became more specialized. Turkeys in Nobles County were always a small-scale diversification and, with the coming of export-driven industrialization, farmers no longer felt they could be distracted by them. Turkey farming at Worthington, Minnesota, gradually became a thing of the past.

A few years ago, the town, battered by yet another bust in the farm economy, began to dream about what it might do to build on the tradition that had fostered its turkey industry. After due deliberation a scheme was announced, but it was not a fresh alliance between farmers and merchants to cooperate for the benefit of all. The new scheme was to erect a giant fiberglass turkey at the edge of town to lure passersby off the interstate in the hope that they would drop a few bucks along the way.

What new work we make in the rural parts of our country these days is largely of the branch manufacturing kind, assembling components or packing or canning—high maintenance, low paying. Rural Americans have attracted these jobs by selling themselves as cheap and undemanding and by putting up the cash to build the roads and sewers, construct the sewage treatment facilities, erect the buildings, and hire the additional police officers, court officials, and social workers that prove necessary in communities where people have neither satisfying work nor sufficient wages. These are lessons we teach our rural children today: that their parents were expendable and that their duty is to abandon their dreams and become cogs in the industrial machine.

V. A REASON TO SURVIVE

Here’s another message we give them, in ways both subtle and direct. If they expect to amount to anything, they had better leave home. The truth is, the future

we are preparing for ourselves in rural America does not include a place for ambitious young men and women. A friend of mine who teaches at a rural university says that the institution ought frankly to offer a class, in place of freshmen English, called How to Migrate. When we sell ourselves in the name of economic development as ideally suited to the least attractive kinds of factory work because our people are willing to labor hard and at subsistence wages without complaining or organizing, or when we allow the rest of society to dump its toxic trash on our land because we'll do anything for a few jobs, what are we telling our children about our ideas, our hopes, our dreams?

Sometimes the message is more subtle. We constantly put down the professional person who chooses to work among us as less competent than folks who have made it in the big cities. My wife is a small-town defense attorney. One night when she was out for a meeting, the telephone rang. The caller was another professional woman in town, a friend. She was looking for Nancy. I said that she wasn't in. "Well," our friend said, "perhaps you can help me. That boy who has been charged with attempted murder—some of us are certain he is innocent. We're organizing a defense fund for him and we need to hire an attorney."

"I'm not the lawyer," I said, "but Nancy will be back any minute and I'm sure she would be glad to help."

"You understand, of course," our friend replied, "how serious this charge is. We need to hire a real attorney. Somebody from the Twin Cities." She said it without the slightest intention, I'm sure, of putting my wife down. It's just an assumption we make. If you were any good, you wouldn't be here. What does that assumption, which lurks everywhere in rural America, say to our children?

If we're going to begin to make a real future for ourselves in rural America, we have to begin by telling stories about our own competencies, about our own abilities, about the things we can do, instead of dwelling so often and at such length on all the things that seem overwhelming and impossible.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, the great psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl pondered his time as a prisoner at Auschwitz and questioned why some people in that impossible circumstance were able to survive while others very quickly collapsed and died. The key, Frankl concluded, was simply this: the people who survived had managed to image some reason for going on. He writes about a woman who watched a tree outside her window and who found in the opportunity to see that tree every morning enough meaning to sustain her. In his own case, Frankl imagined being in the company of his wife. He didn't know whether she was dead or alive. It didn't matter. What mattered was that he was able to imagine her and that act kept him alive until he was liberated. Frankl endorses Nietzsche: "Where there is any kind of why, there is always some how."

That, I think, is our hope. Let us believe in ourselves, tell our stories, dream our dreams, and there will always be some how. ⊕