

Baring Our Soles

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As I packed up to come to Harvard College 7 years ago, I received an earnest letter from my roommate-to-be, Randy Bruce. Randy, a high-school football star from the small farm town of Princeton in western Kentucky, was anxious to assure me that despite rumors to the contrary, folks in his part of Kentucky really do *wear shoes!* I came to know Randy to be a remarkable person, someone who had traversed a rough road to arrive at Harvard. He was raised by a tough single mom, literally on the wrong side of the tracks, and spoke the language of populists and intellectuals alike. On such a road, it was vital to be well shod.

I also became well-acquainted with Randy's fellow Princetonians, as he spun long yarns documenting the richly tangled lives of his friends and neighbors—always taking care to include the position, playing weight, and 40-yard dash time of any male of suitable age. On his visits home, the locals teased Randy that he was becoming “Yankeeified”—I don't know whether they could detect this from some slight shift in his accent, or from his new-found familiarity with Machiavelli and Marx. Nonetheless, Randy defied their taunts by returning home to study and practice law in Kentucky and Tennessee.

Of all his remarkable traits, my roommate's return home may have been the most remarkable. Harvard's alumni records reveal that few of us hale from such localities as Princeton, Kentucky, and even fewer of us ever return. Two thirds of recent Harvard Law graduates took employment in one of only four states. A similar picture emerges across the university: 56% of its graduate students, 55% of its MBAs and over half of its medical doctors also settle in the same four locations—Massachusetts, New York, California, and Washington, DC. The only bright spot is that the Divinity School also sends 58% of its graduates to these places (no doubt to minister to the spiritual needs of the rest of us).

Thus, Harvard violates the ancient adage that one ought not put all of one's eggheads in the same basket. This geo-

graphic concentration of the university's graduates contrasts with the aspiration to diversity in the university's incoming students. Harvard scours the nation for talent that might go overlooked due to geography, and strives to ensure that economic circumstances are no barrier. The perverse result is to harvest talented individuals from America's heartlands and to deposit them in a few chosen centers of intellectual, economic, and political life.

What should we make of this massive brain drain? After all, the aggregation of Harvard's alumni is an outcome of individual choices, past and present. It may be that others would make the same choice if given the opportunity. A down-at-the-heel acquaintance of mine back home in rural Maine is fond of saying, “If you could buy a bus ticket with food stamps, we'd all be gone outta here.”

We who graduate today ought to reevaluate our choices because these choices may be bad for us, and they seem almost certainly bad for America. The concentration of intellectual workers furthers the emerging division of our country into two nations: a nation of those who enjoy the advantages of an array of knowledge-based skills, and a nation of those who do not. The country has lost faith in the leadership of a centralized elite, and the elite has lost confidence in its own capacity to lead. To fill this vacuum, many urge that we tap the energies and ideas of states and localities. Others fear that such local institutions and the people who run them may lack the competence or the caring to be entrusted with the nation's welfare. If talented, committed individuals continue to depart from these states and localities, and do not return, then such prophecies will be self-fulfilling. Our efforts may be as sorely needed in Boise as they are in Boston, in Nashville as in New York.

I do not propose that *all* intellectuals should be trucked to the countryside for reeducation. Such radical treatment can be reserved for the truly incorrigible, such as those who went to Yale. Far from oppressing us, leaving the nation's intellectual nurseries might revitalize us. Many cosmopolites feel a nagging disconnection from a broader, more vibrant civic life. In exclusive suburbs, gated compounds, or guarded highrises, we may be safe—at least for the moment—but we are not healthy. It is only a small step from aggregation to segregation. The resulting failure to invest our time and love in the communal bonds that refresh our humanity feeds a nostalgia for the kind of civic life that still thrives in many of the places we have left behind. If this void is felt so keenly by so many of us, why do we still

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hope to find fulfillment in communities filled with other rootless, footloose intellectuals?

Our membership in a national intellectual community sustains our passion for the life of the mind and our faith in the relevance of ideas for the life of the body and the spirit. But if this community of mind becomes also an identity of place, we become dangerously insular. We will be unable to comprehend the trials and triumphs of a larger society, much less offer leadership to it. Harvard has proven its ability to gather talent from the far reaches of the nation and the world; only its graduates can return that talent to

the multitude of places where the struggle for a better life is conducted without a Yankee accent. This return may not be a sacrifice, but a renewal. As the folks of Princeton, Kentucky could tell you, you don't need to take your shoes off in order to keep your feet on the ground.

References

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