

Thinking Locally, Acting Globally

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I come before you today dressed in the uniform of a Harvard graduate. But in the civilian world, the world beyond these ivied walls, I am a resident of the tiny town of St. Albans, Maine. You've never heard of it? Wait, it gets worse: They've never heard of you, either!

On the eve of my departure for Harvard, my neighbor asked me if I planned to attend college. Upon hearing of my intention to matriculate at Harvard, she innocently responded, "Harvard, huh. Is that a good school?" My conviction somewhat shaken, I affirmed that it was.

From those who have heard of Harvard, I have endured the stigma of studying at the bastion of polo-playing, caviar-munching, champagne-sipping, a capella-singing, Latin-speaking, world-trotting preppies. This is not a stereotype that plays well in a community of pickup truck-driving, moose-hunting, tobacco-chewing, lumberjacking Maine-iacs.

In many ways it has been difficult for me to move between the cosmopolitan, intellectual universe that is Harvard and the parochial, unenlightened confines of St. Albans. I feel myself becoming an outsider in a community with an enduring distrust of things "from away."

This transition is complicated by the fact that my credentials were suspect from the very beginning. I was born in Maine, but both of my parents are "from away." Some traditionalists would go so far as to deny my own citizenship for this reason. I asked a friend why this was so, and he responded cryptically, "Well, if a cat had kittens in the oven, you wouldn't call 'em biscuits, would ya?"

It is not my intention to disparage the exacting standards of membership in a community like mine. It may be that membership is so dear because its possession is so valuable. In a time when much of the world is increasingly fragmented and atomized, the bonds and claims of neighborhood are still strong in St. Albans.

When the shack of Peanut Neal, an infamous local character, burned to the ground last Christmas, the town came together to build him a new one. When my father was incapacitated with a bad back, folks in town brought us groceries to get by. Our historical anachronism is a town still governed by townspeople where helping people out is not considered to be the job of government, but of people.

The community's suspicion of outsiders is matched only by its contempt for those who can think but who cannot do. The people of St. Albans believe in growing things, building things, making things, not in talking about things. (It is, in short, the academic's worst nightmare!)

Most of my life, I have spent my summers working on farms, my back aching, feet throbbing, and hands moving, always moving. There I get paid for doing what I have always loved doing the most, playing in the dirt.

Even the joys of crafting a well-worded essay cannot compare to the joys of helping a bounty of living things spring forth from the bosom of the earth. It is a joy tinged with humility, for you are only a partner in an ancient cycle at birth, growth, death, and rebirth.

My thoughts on the place I love are not just the idle musings of a smitten paramour. The stereotypes I cited at the beginning, of course, are the truth about neither Harvard nor St. Albans. I believe that the contempt that the denizens of small town America feel for us and our institutions is only a reflection of the contempt, often unconscious, that we feel for them and theirs.

Our mistake—and the mistake of a Harvard education—is to confuse sophistication with superiority, and to confuse complexity with accuracy. Harvard succeeds in its goal of teaching us nothing but sometimes fails to teach us the wisdom of knowing that we know nothing. Perhaps there are lessons to be taught by those who are intellectually untrained but spiritually rich to those who are intellectually precocious but spiritually confused.

Yellow Light Breen, born and raised in rural Maine, graduated *cum laude* from Harvard University in 1993. These remarks were delivered as the 1993 Senior English Oration at the commencement exercises. Breen currently is in his first year of law school at Harvard University.

The principles that tie together a rural community may be simple, but that does not mean they are either simplistic or easy.

America faces the task today of building a sense of community when we often lack a shared sense of place. Our attention is fixed on the disintegration of American cities like New York, Miami, Detroit, and Los Angeles. To rebuild urban America will require a massive investment in social programs, infrastructure, and economic incentives, all meant to restore a supposedly "simple" sense of community. We have proven too long that we can think and talk about it, but we have not proven that we can do it.

As we try to recreate the ideals behind community, we have forgotten the communities that

most embody the ideal. Today we have a president who claims to believe in a place called Hope. The Hope that he speaks of is not the small town in Arkansas, for Bill Clinton, like many of us, is willing to believe in places like Hope, so long as he doesn't have to live there.

Obviously, not all of us can live in small towns. But what we can do is seek to make the places where we do live into real communities. To do so, we need a rediscovery of the America that has come to believe that we are "from away." We can only hope that when we do find them they are willing to have us back.