

Glenn Campbell's
Philosophy Notes

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Monograph no.107

March 18, 2008

Small Town Blues

Wouldn't it be nice just to chuck it all, buy a few acres in the wilderness, build a cabin, and finally get away from the rat race?

Well, I'm here to tell you it's a delusion. There is no escape from the stresses of life, at least geographically. If you run away from the urban rat race, you may find yourself trapped in something worse: the rural rat race.

I speak from experience, having succumbed to the lure of the wide open spaces earlier in my life. I grew up in Massachusetts, a land of miserable weather, dense population and way too much noise of every kind. When an opportunity arose to move to the rural desert, I jumped on it. The emptiness and simplicity of the landscape appealed to me. It cleared my brain of noise and gave me space to define myself.

The only disruptions to my utopian dream were people. Turns out, they are everywhere, no matter what remote corner of the world you settle in, and sooner or later you are going to have to interact with them.

Living in a cabin may be pleasant for a while, but eventually civilization draws you back. No individual—or couple—can survive for long without stimulation from the outside, even in paradise. Sooner or later, you have to come to town.

That's when you discover what hell a small town can be. The trouble is there aren't many people to choose from—a very limited talent pool. The

chances of you finding people who match your interests and outlook are slim. At the same time, you are forced to interact with people you don't get along with.

The biggest selling point of small towns is that everyone knows their neighbors. The biggest curse is also that everyone knows their neighbors. Small towns are essentially islands, with an assortment of dysfunctional people shipwrecked together. Maybe they're no more dysfunctional than humans anywhere, but here you have no escape, no choice.

Things might go fine when you first arrive, but then you inadvertently step on someone's toes, and the feuds begin. In small towns, grudges can go on for years because there's nothing to interrupt them. All the clarity and simplicity of the wilderness means that people never forget anything. A wound of ten years ago is as fresh as if it happened yesterday.

There may be beauty in the landscape, but after a couple of weeks, you don't see it anymore. You soon face the same problems of living you had in the city. The only difference is you now have fewer resources to deal with them.

You have to drive longer to a grocery store, and then you have fewer options to choose from. If you need any kind of complex service, like specialty medical care, you've got to make the long trek to the city.

If you need a job in a rural area,

your options are limited to the few local industries. You'll have to work at the hog farm or commute a long distance for something only slightly better.

If you thought politics in the city were nasty, then try them in the country. They have elections, too, just as vicious as any others, but there's usually no credible press to keep things in line. Without the moderation of big bureaucracies, rural politics are much more volatile, with stupid ideas and petty battles getting much more traction.

Small towns tend to breed a "good ol' boy" network that runs things to their own advantage. You will probably always be an outsider to this group, especially if you have more talent than they do. If you have new ideas, don't expect them to get a warm welcome, because small towns are more attuned to "the way things are done." That's the dark side of rural charm, the reason these places are frozen in the past.

Worst of all, there is stupidity. When the talented kids graduate from high school, the first thing they do is get out of town. Generation after generation, the best and brightest are sucked to the city, where the opportunities are better. The mediocre and dim are left behind... and they breed! This results in genetic stupidity.

It can be a great joy to move back to the city, where you don't know your neighbors and they don't know you. Anonymity is the default condition, which means you only have to engage with the people you choose. A city of a million gives you a huge talent pool compare to a town of 500.

And big city crime? It's a joy, too! At least the police have real crime to worry about and have no interest in you if you haven't committed one.

It's way better than the rural sheriff with nothing to do, dumb as a stick but empowered by the voters, knowing your business and keeping an eye on you.

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