IN PRAISE OF HOMETOWNS

Mary Pipher

Communities exist for the health and enjoyment of those who live in them, not for the convenience of those who drive through them, fly over them or exploit their real estate for profit.

—Theodore Roszak

NINE MILE PRAIRIE

Early evening, I drive with my friend Pam past crowded malls, cinemas, and fast-food joints. Pam has been my friend for thirty years. Her husband and mine have been best friends since kindergarten and Pam sings with my husband’s bands. We’ve had babies together.

We drive to where there is plenty of quiet space and park in an empty lot. We step out into the grainy thick air to hear the trill of larks and the cries of bats trolling for mosquitoes. I ask myself, as I always do at this place, “Where is everybody? Don’t people realize what we have right under our noses?” On the other hand, I am glad everybody is not here. For a few hours, Pam and I have the luxury of a world without humans.

Tonight the tall grasses are backlit by the sun and flame against the green cottonwoods. It’s the time of day that wise traders sell horses. With their coats burnished by the sun, they’re irresistible. Rose hips sparkle like Christmas decorations in the blue-stem and gammer grass. Wild plums, a frosty purple color, hang thick over fences. We’ve picked them many times to make Chinese plum sauce. Rose mallow and goldenrod are blooming. Rare prairie orchids should be blooming, but they are hard to find.

Sometimes we walk on paths and sometimes we tromp through ten-foot tall grasses where we lose each other and shout to identify our location. We fall down on purpose and allow red waves of grass to roll over us. Back on the paths, we hear and then see an eastern bluebird. He flies ahead of us, stops, then when we catch up with him, he leads us on. At dusk, the first few fireflies light their lamps,
creating the illusion of a little prairie town. To the east, the lights of Lincoln twinkle on. The dome of the capitol is a rosy-gold in the sunset. We watch our town light up, then continue our search for prairie orchids.

Pam and I had busy weeks and, like all humans, we have our problems, but as we walk here, breathing in the aroma of the grasses and flowers, feeling the scratchy seedheads and the soft breeze, seeing the blue-pink sky and hearing the animals at work, these problems fall away. We grow quieter. Our breathing changes. We feel at home.

This night turns out to be a night of surprises. As we walk west toward our favorite ridge, we notice dozens of mating monarchs. The males are flying above the females, holding their wings together and uniting in the air.

We stand and watch. We can almost touch them, so oblivious are they to our presence. One couple tangles Pam's hair and five couples land on the Joe Pyeweed plant by my side. We are awash in monarchs.

We congratulate each other on being here on monarch date night. We follow them west right into a small glen, where we discover some prairie orchids blooming. They are tiny white flowers with petals like flags swirling around a delicate silver pole. We breathe in their fragrance. Prairie aromatherapy.

We hike to the ridge and watch the red sun melt into the ground. High above us to the north a red-tailed hawk circles. The lightning bugs continue to switch on, mostly down in the glen among the cottonwoods and sumac, and beside us in the tall grasses.

I wonder, as I always do, what this land looked like to the Native Americans, what our country was like when it was, to quote Paul Gruchow, "a great green heart." The pioneers talked of birds so thick they blocked out the sun, of wild strawberries so plentiful they stained horses' fetlocks red.

Slowly we walk toward our car, quieter now and calmer, our worries put in perspective, our arousal systems tamped by that greatest of all tranquilizers—a sunset.

Nature always speaks if one listens. Tonight she whispered to me, "The world is bigger and older, and more important than you are. It is stronger, more fragile, more complex and beautiful than you can comprehend. And yet, you are part of it. Take care of it and let it take care of you."

Once when I was in New York City, a woman asked me where I was from? When I answered, "Nebraska," she asked rather rudely, "Have you considered moving?"

I mumbled an inane answer, but I never thought of a better answer ever since. My answer tonight would be, "No, I am home and home is not a salable piece of real estate."

It's that simple and that complicated. Nebraska for most people is the state they drive through on the way to someplace else. Our state is six hours of Interstate 80. Of course, that's not the way to see any place.

In general, Nebraska is still stark to be pretty, but it's beautiful. It's beauty is its scope, its great table of horizon, its skies that dominate all earthly landscapes, and its great rivers; the Loup, the Dismal, the Niobrara, and the Platte. Nebraska contains the vast and quiet Sandhills, where the population is less than one person per square mile. It shelters cranes, meadowlarks, and mourning doves. With our state, the trick is knowing how to find its beauty. Once when someone said Nebraska wasn't beautiful, my husband responded, "Come back with a better pair of eyes." But Nebraska isn't my home because of its beauty. It is beautiful because it is my home. The curve of its hills and the songs of its cicadas have etched themselves into my mind. The landscape of my childhood is the Nebraska horizon. When I am away from here for more than a few days, I yearn for the sights and smells of Nebraska. Wherever I travel, I look for the geese overhead, the empty spaces, the cottonwood and Russian olives that remind me of home.

As Eudora Welty said, "As soon as a man stopped wandering and stood still and looked around him, he found a god in that place." That's how I feel. Anyplace can be home, can be beautiful, if you stop and claim it, if you take the trouble to discover what is available to love.
ONE BIG TOWN

Soon the question where do you come from will be as antiquated as what regiment do you belong to?

—Pico Iyer

Demographic clusters have replaced national identity as the great definers. People in those clusters share the same activities, opinions, and tastes whether they live in London, Milan, Hong Kong, or Lincoln. Everywhere is becoming everywhere else. Globalization, war, environmental catastrophes, and mass migration have led to an upending of cultures that affects all of us. Our world is often referred to as a global village, but it could perhaps be more accurately described as a global strip mall. It’s tawdry, impersonal, and dull. Globalization means we all live in one ugly company town. Many of us are trying to find a way back to a place called home.

In the past century, the Midwest where I live has undergone enormous demographic changes. All over the prairie, the lights have gone out as farmers have moved to the suburbs and little towns have dried up like tumbleweeds. Downtown cafes have closed and the locals now drink coffee at the Arby’s on the highway. As we travel the interstates, which Paul Gruchow called “tunnels without walls,” we see the same stores, cafes, and hotels everywhere.

Bill McKibben defined a working community as one in which it would be difficult for outsiders to fit in. That’s because the information in the community would be specific, related to that time and place and grounded in the history of its inhabitants. Songwriter Greg Brown said, “Your home town is where you know what the deal is. You may not like it, but you understand it. You know the rules and who is breaking them.”

When I think of a working community, I think of my father’s Ozark town. Cousins lived near each other and everyone knew everyone. Outsiders had a tough time getting information about locals because the only outsiders were salespeople or IRS and FBI agents looking for moonshine stills. On the other hand, sixty years after my father left the Ozarks, I can still go there, explain who my family was, and extract special privileges—a campground on private property and advice on where to fish and pick berries.

Strip malls and sprawl have taken their toll on sense of place. Similarly, our host of new inventions, gadgets, and technological tools have undermined community. While many of these inventions have improved our lives in some ways, they have also eroded the fabric of family and community. For example, air-conditioning has changed neighborhoods. Adults no longer sit on their front porches to cool down in the evenings. Streets have become more dangerous without the supervision of neighbors. Automatic dishwashers have saved time for many women, but they have also eliminated time after dinner when family members worked together and talked.

New tools have sped up the pace of our lives. When people communicate by E-mail and fax, the nature of human interaction changes. Laptops and cell phones allow us to work all the time, and many people do. All the technology of our times has its good uses, and any one invention probably wouldn’t do that much damage; the problem is the whole pile. The cumulative effect of all this equipment has changed our daily family life. Quantity has replaced quality and the integrity of our lives has been altered.

Television, among all the inventions of the past fifty years, has had the most significant effects on community. Information and entertainment come from boxes, not neighbors. People spend more time watching music videos, but less time making music with each other. People in small towns now watch international cable networks instead of driving to their neighbor’s house for cards. People in urban settings watch soaps instead of visiting local art galleries and museums. When company comes, the kids are sent to the TV room with videos. Television is on during meals and kids study to television or radio.

Some of the first voices children hear are from the television and the first street they know is Sesame Street. Children learn different messages from these boxes than they would learn from loving adults. Everything from their social skills to their moral development to their coping strategies is different. TV-watching children
have short attention spans and long want lists, at the same time that they have poor impulse control and fewer real skills. Not surprisingly, we have an epidemic of childhood depression.

Television and electronic media have created communities with entirely different rules and structures than the ones of the past. Families gather around the glow of the TV as the Lakota once gathered around the glow of a fire on the Great Plains. But our TVs do not keep us warm, safe, and together. Rapidly, our technology is creating a new kind of human being, one who is plugged into machines instead of relationships, one who lives in a virtual reality rather than a family. And just as families have unraveled, so have communities.

This unraveling of our public life and fracturing of our communities has many costs. Social service agencies are overwhelmed as families can no longer take care of their own. Children are more afraid. They are warned to avoid strangers and, in electronic villages, everyone is a stranger. Old people are isolated from the young. Children yearn for more lap time and teens develop poisonous peer cultures. Families don’t have the social resources they need to raise healthy, wholesome children. Many people are lonely. School-bond issues don’t pass because the older generation doesn’t know children and has only a limited investment in their rearing. Land and water are not protected because we are educated to accumulate private wealth and permit public squaor.

Margaret Mead defined the ideal culture as one in which there was a place for every human gift. No better definition of an ideal culture has ever been written. It includes both respect for the individual and belief in the ability of communities to foster growth in their members. It is hard to realize the gifts of people whom we do not know. It is impossible to develop our own gifts without a web of human relationships. It is also harder to be kind. Because we don’t know the people with whom we are interacting, we can’t inquire about their problems or empathize with their troubles. We don’t notice that they look stressed or tired. We can’t congratulate them on their children’s victories. If we see social interactions as the web that holds our lives in place, that web is torn and tattered by the effects of our technology.

HOME IS OTHER PEOPLE

Joy Harjo wrote, “As long as there is respect and acknowledgment of connections, things continue working. When that stops we all die.”

Home doesn’t have to be where you were born or grew up. It doesn’t have to be a small town; it can be a suburb, a city, or a remote corner of the country. But it does have to be a real place that you have committed to over time. It has to be a place where you have friends and know the names of many people you meet. You know who is kind and honest, who lies, betrays, or fools around. Home is where people care if you have a speeding ticket or a fever. It’s where people ask about your grandbaby and your day lilies and know your favorite kind of pie. It’s where when you sit down to talk you don’t have to discuss Tom Hanks or Benicio Del Toro. You have real people in common.

In true communities, conversation is often, “Did you know he was John’s son-in-law?” Or, “Is she related to the Carsten family?” “Did you know they bought the old Wallinshinsky place?” Or “Did you know Jane and Betsy were schoolmates?” There is pleasure in just acknowledging each other, in nodding on the street and chatting in the cafes and grocery stores. To move away from a true home is to move away from life. I don’t think we begin to acknowledge and understand how much we have lost.

Yet, the great irony is that people move away from home all the time. Every year our young adults head for the mountains, the Sunbelt, or the coasts. Many leave of necessity, especially from farming communities where there is no longer much work. But many leave because the grass looks greener in San Francisco, Phoenix, or Missoula. Likewise older citizens are encouraged by advertisers to move to retirement areas in more beautiful places far from home. When they get there, they are often alone. As Greg Brown said, “You can’t drink a cup of coffee with the landscape.”

I know a family who moved back to New York City after September 11. The wife told me, “That is where our people are. We need to be with them.” A gay couple I know have inspired many of their
friends to move to the outskirts of Omaha. They come there not for Big Red football or the steaks, but for the camaraderie and mutual support of their long-term buddies. I know a couple whose son and daughter-in-law lived in California. When the daughter-in-law became pregnant, they wrote the couple a “letter of invitation.” They didn’t want to pressure their son or his wife to return to Nebraska but they wanted them to know how welcome they would be. They wanted to remind the young family about what was good in our state. In the letter, they mentioned the safety, the ease of travel, the low cost of living, the wide-open spaces, and the good educational system. They wrote about the love they would give a grandchild and the ways the family could help each other if they shared a community. Much to the joy of the parents, the children decided to come home.

Communities are real places, chosen as objects of love, with particular landscapes, sounds, and smells and particular people who live there. Communities are about accountability, about what we can and should do for each other. People who live together have something that is fragile and easily destroyed by a lack of civility. Behavior matters. Protocol is important. Relationships are not disposable. People are careful what they say in real communities because they will live with their words until they die of old age.

Connections have a way of making us morally accountable. At a most basic level we behave better with people and places we will see again and again. Some of the worst behaviors in America occur in airports and on interstates, places where we move among strangers. Over the Internet, people can be deleted the second they become annoying or tiresome. Names aren’t necessarily even real names. One never need see or talk to anyone again.

Responsibility is directly related to scale. The smaller the group, the stronger each member’s sense of duty. Morality is learned by children from real people who are with them every day. They learn that their actions affect other people and they learn that their own lives will go better if they behave well. It is a simple thing, to be in a place where good behavior is rewarded and bad is punished. In that sense all morality, like all politics, is local. The further we are from home, from our people, the less likely we are to see a strong connection between our own behavior and its consequences. There is no accountability in a global village except a ledger sheet. And money is not morality.

Strong communities also treasure and maintain the special names, stories, and history that define particular places. Bill Holm wrote, “We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors no matter how many machines we invent. Only our memory and our metaphors carry us forward, not our money, our gadgets, or our opinions.” Names, stories, and history are intertwined. We cannot love what we cannot name. One of the best ways to instill community is to teach names—of local people, birds, plants, rivers, and sacred sites. Communities are much enriched by local history books. Older people who are, in a sense, living history books, greatly benefit a community by telling stories to its children. Yellow Springs, Ohio, had an environmental mentor program in which an older person was paired with a young person. The pair walked around town and talked about the town’s stories and how the place used to be.

We owe a great deal to people who came before us and to what Paul Tillich called “the structure of grace in history.” Communities need ways of sharing stories. This is one of the most primal experiences of humans, to be together telling stories of the day. To be a member of a community is to have a voice and a face in that community. One must be a part of the legends, the colorful characters and the heroes who help define a place.

Story sharing and face-to-face interactions are greatly facilitated by design. Community occurs where there are public spaces—sidewalks, bike trails, parks, outdoor markets, and festivals. Ray Oldenberg wrote in The Great Good Place, there are three essential places—where we live, where we work, and where we gather together for conviviality. Those communal places are needed now more than ever.

Diversity in community is as healthy as diversity in any ecosystem. Without diversity in age, ethnicity, and ideas, we don’t have communities; we have lifestyle enclaves. Community does not mean “free of conflict.” It’s inevitable and even healthy to have
great differences. Even conflict can lead to closeness. As Dennis Schmitz wrote, "Humans wrestle with each other, and sometimes that wrestling turns into embracing."

A strong community will include people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and interests. Community, communication, and communion all come from the same word, meaning together and next to. Embedded in the word is the concept of shared place.

**RECLAIMING OUR COMMUNITIES**

_The love of your own country hasn’t to do with foreign politics, burning flags or the Maginot Line against immigrants at the border. It has to do with light on a hillside, the fat belly of a local trout, and the smell of newly-mown hay._

—Bill Holm

On the cusp of a globalized world, at the start of a new century, we can only just imagine a world with no real countries. But the paradox is that the more one travels and has contact with the world, the more one needs a home. The more we live in a global shopping mall, the more important it is to look at the stars and visit with our neighbors. The cure to the cultural colonialism of global shopping malls is loving our home town. "Provincial" and "parochial" have traditionally had negative connotations, but they can also mean the sacredness of one's town. Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "It just may be that the most radical act we can commit is to stay home."

Falling in love with a place is like falling in love with a person; once you are in deep it's best to have a long-term committed relationship, one that requires sacrifice. Commitment implies protecting, nurturing, and defending. Without geography, there is no accountability. Without geography there is nothing to defend.

Many of the things that would change the quality of our neighborhoods are simple, but not easy. Architects could design homes that reach out into the community, homes with front porches or homes built around courtyards so that children can play together in protected places. Developers can save wild areas for children and set aside common space for families to enjoy. Co-housing, which is a way of designing neighborhoods so that communal life is possible, is an important new option. Walking, biking, and good public transportation systems could replace automobiles, one of the greatest destroyers of neighborhoods. The essential step is really the change in attitude, from the worship of privacy to an acknowledgment of our needs for connection, and from this new awareness, architecture will follow.

City apartment buildings can have parties in the lobbies and ways for residents to interact on a regular basis. Urban dwellers can schedule weekly potlucks with friends on the beach or in a park at sunset. Schools can serve a free meal to the school community once a month so everyone knows everyone and their children.

Very simple steps will help you build community. Turn off your machines, walk outside, and talk to the children in your neighborhood. Ask the waiter at the place you buy your morning coffee about his family. Go to a school board meeting, befriend the older people in your condo, coach a ball team, or mentor an immigrant family.

Plant a community garden, learn the names of your neighbors and storekeepers. Buy locally. Know all local flowers. Give schoolchildren trees to plant and encourage them to stay and watch the trees grow tall. Celebrate the first corn of the year and the first urban dogwood blossoms. Sponsor festivals, feasts, and block parties. Go folk dancing, attend bluegrass festivals and enjoy local ethnic celebrations. Sing in a local choir, run for office, start a book club, or form a conversation cafe.

Simple tools help people know each other. For example, when we moved into our neighborhood, the man next door drew us a map of our street. On every house, Ron wrote the names of the parents and what they did, the names and ages of the children, and their phone numbers. He knew which parents were home during the day and which families had pets. This small act made us feel welcome and connected from day one. Later, Ron gave us a list of unusual or expensive items that neighbors were willing to loan. Over the years we shared ladders, microphones, video cameras, snow blowers, pickups, Halloween costumes, and wheelbarrows. These small
matters helped a great deal. Once we knew our neighbors’ names, we had something to build upon. Sharing goods saved us all money and gave us a sense of connection.

Even the busiest person can do a little. Adults can learn the names of the people on their block or in their apartment building and wave to the children and retired people. They could help kids find lumber to build a fort or help an elderly neighbor into her apartment with her groceries. Adults can talk for a few minutes to the children who deliver newspapers or flyers. Parents of teenagers can meet once a month and talk about how the children are doing. Families can put their lawn chairs in the front yards rather than on fenced-in back patios. Families can organize block parties—potlucks, parades, or star-gazing evenings. Families can carry zucchini bread or garden flowers to each other's houses. They can offer to watch each other's children and, when the children are over, actually play games with them or teach them something. Families could offer to help their neighbors with home improvement projects or write them notes of news, sympathy, or congratulations. Children can set up lemonade stands and all the adults can stop for drinks. It is also good to ask others to help your family. This asking for help also builds community bonds.

Many people protest that they would like to be in a community but they are too busy. They don't have time for other people. What they don't realize is that communities eventually give time to their members. In a community, parents have other adults helping them raise their kids. Neighbors can depend on each other for friendship and support. Fun and companionship are close at hand and do not require elaborate arrangements and lots of money.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, "The earth is crammed with heaven." Nine Mile Prairie is one slice of heaven. The coffee-colored Platte another. Every town and city has many places worthy of love and protection. Your slice of heaven may be the Iron Range, or North Beach, or Central Park, or Chesapeake Bay, or Harvard Square. Join with your neighbors to enjoy those places and work to keep them for your great-grandchildren.