



Part IV: Doers and Shapers

Part IV explores the people and institutions that push boundaries. Starting with education, we take an engrossing journey through the philosophy of John Dewey, leading to the hands-on style of Goddard College, the Putney School, and the inseparable connection between education and democracy. We explore other progressive movements: Vermont's famous Billboard law and Act 250, cultural movements such as Bread and Puppet Theater and finally Vermont's groundbreaking civil union law. Democracy at work—differing voices, different points of view.

Sturdiness

By Sydney Lea

Having seen this film, in all its stunning beauty, I recognize that I am, and will always be, near schizophrenic in my attitude toward the state. Like my friend Frank Bryan, I understand and in many ways sympathize with the real sentiment behind “Take Back Vermont.” As one of the farmers in the movie so intelligently notes, there are some who come here with a bizarre will to transform what they have fled to into what they have fled from, and in the process, whether overtly or privately, they suggest their contempt for the sensibilities and the mores of genuine Yankees, the most industrious and least servile working people in the nation, even, perhaps, in the world.

In my own town, Frank's native one, I once heard a newcomer (fortunately departed after the first old-time winter) remark that ours would be a fine place if only it had one Mexican restaurant, as if somehow the natives and long-time residents had lived, even if unconsciously, in a sort of cultural destitution for 250 years now, as if the town and the state didn't have a deep cultural tradition, which has made it what it is. Happily, the town meeting ethos that pervades that culture grants every denizen, no matter how lowly he or she may appear to self-styled sophisticates, the utter freedom to tell their adversaries to go to hell. That's a precious right. Ours is a liberal state, according to the labels; but there is something marvelously conservative in the best sense about that very permission: do we or do we not believe in the imputed traditional American right of every man and woman to have a say?

Vermonters do, as a rule. I wish I were as confident that the claim applied to the country at large, that it could apply in our age of mega-corporation and mega-government.

And yet there are few Vermonters in my experience who exercise that sacred right in bombastic ways. Civility tends to rule the day, and it is this quality perhaps above all others that endears our small republic to me above all others, a quality that could also greatly benefit our greatly vexed national dialogue, which usually seems no dialogue at all.

I am not sociologist nor historian, but I suspect this habit of mind derives from the commonwealth's earliest times, when neighbor treated neighbor with decency because he or she knew that one day that neighbor might be a crucial friend in need.

That neighborly stance is infectious for the most part, though of course some late arrivals and even some old-timers do seem immune. Note that that no one ever introduces you to anyone else; no, you simply live in the region, prove yourself decent and honest, and eventually you start getting called by your first name (not "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Ms."). Unlike the fly-by-night who missed his gourmet tacos and burritos, the newcomers who make their way with the locals, and who therefore stay on, see the wisdom in an attitude not merely of tolerance, as it's been shown to them, but also of celebration. It may take a while, but once you have a true Vermonter for a friend, he or she is your friend for good.

A brief digression: paddling at daylight on Molly's Falls Pond a couple of summers ago, I saw a golden eagle. I was and am sure of the observation, having spent significant time hunting and fishing in the open west, where such a sighting is more or less commonplace. I went back home, looked up the e-mail of the state's migratory bird biologist, and reported the incident. He said he'd like to, but could not take my word. Perhaps he did not want to be like the game warden who once again is summoned to check out a mountain lion sighting...which in one case turns out, as such a warden once told me, to be a pug dog! But no, he did trust my identification, but quite justly told me that he could not record the sighting without his or another state-affiliated biologist's having been on hand. "You may be interested to know, however," he added, "that a Canadian biologist told us of a golden eagle on northern Memphremagog two days ago. I suspect it's the same bird."

I ask you, where else in America could I so easily have had access to so busy a professional in the state's employ?

Vermont is small enough that one tends to know, or at worst to know of, his or her neighbors; one can get in touch with her politicians and civil servants. The flip side of this, of course, is that we don't have a lot of privacy, far, far less than in the great urban centers. But I'll take the trade. When our children were small, for instance, I found comfort in knowing that, were some unsavory stranger to approach them in the village, everybody within sight would know they were our children, and that this guy had no business with them.

In a word, individuals here are conspicuous: they can't help displaying themselves, precisely, as individuals, and—provided they not be felonious or nasty—they tend to be affirmed in that uniqueness. So the culture to which I refer is not so much the Emersonian one of self-reliance touted by popular myth as it is one in which people do, yes, manifest their uniqueness of self because everybody else is doing the same thing, but one too in which they are communally affirmed in that freedom. Be yourselves, we are told, whether or not in words, but be part of a social unit too. Help out when help is needed; ask for help when you're the one in need.

I have been blessed—there is no other word—to have known North Country elders since my

young manhood. Their voices ring in my head literally every day. I must acknowledge these men and women as having had far greater influence on my writing than any of the great literary forebears, their lack of external entertainment making them masters of narrative, and narrative being an addiction of mine. I learned from the best. I mourn these old ones' passing from the bottom of my heart. My beloved 90-year-old neighbor couple are among the last people in the state or nation who will have known a life unimaginable today, one that, speaking of mythology, was scarcely Arcadian and simple. It was a rough, rough go; but a certain quality that I call sturdiness (which manifests itself in the brilliant and enigmatic work of Vermont's perennial poet laureate, Robert Frost) abided and abides.

But yes, times change. The hill farm culture was already anachronistic in Frost's youth, and is perhaps terminally vulnerable where it still exists. But let that sturdiness I speak of—that freedom from self-pity, that self-assurance that can applaud difference, that iron-hard loyalty to friends and kin—be something we carry into and through all the inevitable change.

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