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Working Selves, Moral Selves: Crafting the Good Person in the Northern Plains

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The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates value by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are usually not in doubt about the direction in which Good lies.

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, p. 95

There's a whole bunch of everything. It's growing things. Raising the cattle, and just doing things like that. Just being out here. It's just . . . farming isn't out there, it's in you. It's not in your head. And it has to be a business anymore, more than it was when my dad was farming. But there's something that's more than the business of farming. If it was just a business I wouldn't be here. There's easier businesses than this to work at.

Joe Bauer, West River Farmer

One Monday night in August, under the pan-sized harvest moon over Joe Bauer's Dunn County wheat fields, two tired men eased their huge red machines into the shadows of an abandoned farmstead marked by a shelterbelt and a single weather-beaten shed. Joe and his wife Marie had hauled their last load of the day. Their son Will had just taken his full load of grain back to the yard after working his magic under the old Ford's hood. I'd hung back with the service van and the gas tank trailer to feel the cooling air and watch the play of combine lights against the sharp edge where stubble meets standing grain. Joe's cousin Craig and brother Wayne gentled their combines into position, swung their augers out, and pumped the sweet fullness of new wheat into the last truck's groaning box. They'd been out here all day running three trucks through their paces. Two combines bring surrender to a field more quickly than seems reasonable. Nobody gets much chance to rest.

If there is any meaning to this for these farmers, it resides in the unsubtle union of flesh and spirit that they live every day and that one way or another gets proclaimed from their altars every week. Life on this prairie is as intensely and unreflectively Aquinian as any I've seen. Nobody here is likely to cite the Summa as an explanation for their actions, but its spirit pervades their world. Something like this lived in Joe's comment to me during a break from seeding back in April, "I know what we're doing is right. And I know the Lord made me for this. I just want to do it right is all." This idea of the good resides in the body's actions, in habits built up over a lifetime. There is no other way to be good than to do good. There is no other way to be a farmer than to farm. There is no other way to be than to do.

Church goer or not, a West River farmer lives a life of sacrament. Sacraments are ways to bring God's grace home to the body. And even those in the formal spaces of the Catholic churches in West River are likely to bring the sacred back to everyday experience. The call and response of chanted prayers, the motion of calloused fingers, the hard wood of the kneeler sacralize the familiar.

If you walk into St. Stephen's Church just before mass in the farming country south of town, you'll hear an old woman leading a rosary. "Hail Mary full of grace..." she'll chant. "Holy Mary, Mother of God..." everybody replies. Bead after hard bead through tired hands. The cadences and the repetition stop time long enough for rest. Stay longer and you'll hear the Litany of the Saints. It begins familiarly enough, invoking the names of Mary and then the saints, before veering into its strictly local meanings:

*Holy Mary, Pray for us,
Holy Mother of God, Pray for us...*

*St. Isidore, pray for us.
St. Maria, pray for us.
All you holy Farmers and Ranchers, pray for us...¹*

*From all evil, O Lord, deliver us.
From all sin, O Lord deliver us.
From drought....
From famine....
From destructive storms...
From destructive insects and pests...
From greed,
From discouragement...
From false self-sufficiency...
From everlasting death...*

Thus is death personalized and joined in the imagination to worldly caprice and the unanchored heart's casual temptations. Deliver us, they say, not only from this threatening world, but also from the sins of selfishness, hubris, and the throwing up of hands.

* * *

I went to the world of farms and ranches near the North Dakota town I call West River with questions about how the culture of work and family gets shaped by a place and its history. I was interested, too, in how changes in work and career choices might affect relations between those who stay and those who leave. My work concentrates on how enculturation in a rural world structures the responses of people to American work and family changes. This chapter looks especially at notions of character and the good in that light.

The uses of rural and farm life turn on the cultural idea we call character, a notion which has fascinated Americans throughout their history and which bears important connections to that sense of individualism first diagnosed and named by Tocqueville in the 1830s. Our sense of the play of character in our lives has always carried an ambivalence. On the one hand, its qualities seem to emphasize its instrumental role in achieving material advantage, as though a

¹ Among the patron saints for farmers are Isidore and Maria, but also relevant to West River is St. Benedict, founder of the very monastic order to which the nearby Abbey belongs.

person's quality must inevitably be revealed in exterior circumstance. But another stream emphasizes more interior elements of selfhood where the measure of character is less public, less inscribed in material markers of success. For farmers in particular the thing they call character is as rooted in community history, the physical nature of place, and the rhythm of everyday life as in the things they can put into words.

My discussion here is based on sharing that everyday life, along with conversation, with about a 100 people in West River and its surrounding landscape. Although most of the quotes come from transcriptions of taped interviews, the experiences and conversations of my fieldwork are still fresh enough to remember the sound of voice, the quality of the day, and the details of setting in ways that get lost once these things get hardened into data. I go through my fieldnotes thinking of the reluctance of Brother Ambrose Vettel, a Benedictine monk, to talk to me when I first walked down the hill to where he was cleaning out a grain bin. "Can't have you at the barn," he said, "you'll scare the cows with that hair of yours." I told him I'd put it up under my cap if it would make them feel better. He laughed and told me to come on over.

There's an advantage to writing from within this freshness. If I wait longer, I might find myself concentrating on that part of our interview that I taped and had transcribed rather than on the laugh preceding it. I might forget how Ambrose hummed to himself while sweeping up the old grain. Or that his jeans were patched a few times over. Or that his workboots had holes worn into their scuffed leather. I might forget, too, how the cool morning of that August day was sliding toward heat and late afternoon thunderheads. How the oats needed harvesting while we talked.

Sharing lives is the most classic of ethnographic methods. In my case, it meant sleeping in the Bauer family's spare room and rising at 5:00 AM to start the day with them. It meant driving tractor and combine, breaking machinery, and helping with repairs. It meant walking fence line and being bit by deer flies in a high hot wind. It meant pulling calves when cows needed help with a birth, watching who calls whom in an emergency, and learning how to tie chains around those delicate hooves, attach them to a pulley, and avoid the pour of afterbirth when the newborn calf yanks free. And it meant staying in the fields until the red sun crossed the western buttes at 10:00 and we could all go home to eat supper.

Fewer than two percent of Americans work at farming these days, yet most people feel a connection beyond experience to these scenes. The family farm signifies a core element of our self-understanding. From the Jeffersonian image of a democratic republic resting on its landed and independent citizenry to more current images linking the good life, a living work ethic, and strong family values to the countryside, farming holds an especially virtuous place in the American imagination. Writing about Britain, Raymond Williams could have easily had the United States in mind when he noted the almost "inverse proportion, in the twentieth century, between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas" (1973: 248). The rural continues as a contemporary icon of the past.

Much of what these images have in common has to do with the connections among work, character, and family. Couched in a language that emphasizes farming as a way of life, our understanding of farm life too easily treats it as the last redoubt of integrated family and work life before "capitalists took production out of the household and collectivized it, under their own supervision, in the factory" (Lasch 1979: xx). Even when the story is less than idyllic, we nevertheless hold farmers up as an idealized contrast to the sense that something is missing in

our own “modern” temperament.

Of course, this denial of the present-tense to farming simplifies a complex reality (see, for example, Davidson 1996 or Dudley 2000). Farmers are as subject to globalized markets as any other worker. Joe’s satellite feed is one indication of this. Despite the family economy of husband, wife, son, and cousin, he tracks the potential impact of American grain sales to Pakistan and the long term probability of drought in grain producing regions of Texas or Argentina as closely as any other producer eyes the competition.

Even as they continue to see it as a privileged way of life that instills a particular set of values, most people in West River acknowledge that farming has changed. Joe mentions that things were different for his father and uncle who farmed about 1000 acres together and made do without the FHA loans that Joe’s own family requires to get their over 2000 acres into seed. The pressure to produce and sell grain at a level that will repay those loans and leave a margin grinds without relief at both Craig and Joe from the spring seeding through the harvest.

The paradox of farming, and its relevance to understanding wider American life, is precisely that its symbolic role in our cultural imagination more explicitly acknowledges its interweaving of work, family, and character. Both Joe and Craig see farming as a partnership that involves the commitment of their wives and families. It requires an array of skills to be done right and instills a special set of virtues in their children. At the same time, it connects them to a set of worries that encumber the free exercise of the spirit. Craig put that tension into words:

Oh, I love to drive combine. That part of it I could do all the time. But when it comes to managing this stuff, watching the markets bounce back and forth, back and forth, a penny, a dime, a nickel, I can’t take that crap. It’s too much stress. I won’t do it. As far as the marketing part of it, the older people don’t watch the markets that close because it’s too stressful. The markets never used to vary much. If they varied a dime in a year that was a lot. But now it’s so off the wall.

The business of farming is based on explicit assumptions about idealized family relationships, gendered categories, and work. These are the avenues that link domestic and public worlds. The countervailing myth of the American Middle Class family has, on the other hand, pretended to a separation of these same domains. As scholarly attention shifts to the dynamic relationship that has always characterized these intersections among the majority of Americans (Schor 1993; Newman 1999; Hochschild 2001), a reconsideration of this powerful symbol places us on firmer comparative ground. The poet Thomas McGrath, a native North Dakotan, wrote “Dakota is everywhere” (1997). His meaning points to the value of ethnography -- wherever we live and whatever we do, the stories we hear about a single place tell us something about ourselves.

Identities of Family, Place, and Character

West River residents hold their own private geographies, a composite of the moral and physical landscapes they call home. There’s no avoiding the drama of place in West River Country. Where in more humid and forested places the trees seem to spike the sky and hold it out of reach, the West River skies seem to brush the grass. One day’s aching blue gives way to thunderhead or the green shimmer of the northern lights. The space and distance are all around and acknowledged by people like the school principal who uses the perception of

outsiders to make his point. He talked about coming on some students from a nearby college. “They were from New York or New Jersey and sitting on a hillside looking out over the prairie to the north. I said, ‘Isn’t that a beautiful sight?’ and one of them said, ‘Not particularly.’ He was staring off into the distance and said, ‘I just didn’t think a person could see this far.’”

But that sense of space is also personalized. I first noticed it in the drive to find the site of a once thriving community that no longer exists even as a ghost town. It lives on only in the cemetery where people still bring their dead though their families moved on years ago. But it wasn’t the practice of burying the dead at the former site of a family’s living that alerted me to the connection of family and place. It was the long drive south from West River with the school principal, his wife, and the monk who held the maps for finding our lost town.

We couldn’t pass an abandoned farmstead or any other building, strangely shaped tree, creek, or butte without a story being attached to it and linked to a person or a family. The principal gave running commentary the whole way. “See that place -- that’s where the old woman who used to cook for the Abbey lives--all her kids are gone and she’s still getting around at 93. Looks like the house could use some work, she must be slowing down some. Wonder how much longer she’ll be able to live out here alone. Her son moved out to Fargo and the daughters are all gone, too, with marrying. I don’t think this place will stay in the family much longer.”

Even after a family leaves, its memory stays tethered. Huthmacher Hill lies 4 miles north of West River and marks the site of a homestead where no Huthmacher has lived since 1960. This identity of place and family was marked in a conversation I had with one of ten siblings born in West River and now the only remaining member of his family in town:

They said we have to have another reunion in West River because that’s home. We still own fourteen acres of land sort of behind that house, my brothers and sisters. We are hanging onto it because what if one wants to come back? We talked about this. One of them could come back here and build a house there if they wanted to though we sold the house that’s still there.

Place is a matter of both character and location. Great Plains people see themselves as distinctive. The geographer James Shortridge presents a table (1989: 79) that, with a little tweaking, gets at some of this self-image. Although it doesn’t allow a contrast with Great Plains views of outsiders, it makes it clear that people in the plains states are far more likely to view themselves in the positive terms of Thomas Jefferson’s original vision for the American experiment. Fully 93% of his respondents were likely to mention the character traits such as friendly, hard-working, honest, and thoughtful that Jefferson associated with the robust democracy based on a farming citizenry. Only 35% of the people from outside this region were likely to characterize its inhabitants in such positive terms.

West River residents share that self-image and contrast themselves with outsiders in ways that redound to their own credit. George Gleit, a retired contractor and mason, put it like this:

A lot of your people in the business sector, they’re always interested in hiring a North Dakota guy. Well, the work ethic. I mean, they’ve proven themselves. When you get one of them they work continuously. And the rest of ‘em never show up for work.

Doesn't worry them that they're tardy or anything like that. One of the young guys went to work for Boeing Aircraft. He went out there and he was hired and within a couple of weeks, why, he was appointed the foreman. He couldn't believe what happened. And they says, "He was the only guy that showed up for work every day and he was there before time to go to work," you know? And then he was still there at the close-up time where the rest of them were, you know, goldbrickers.

His thoughts were echoed by Frank Falkenstein, president of the town's farm machinery manufacturing company who also elaborated on the conditions leading to this difference:

If you go back to the time I'm talking about -- fifties, sixties -- you not only had a good, hard, strong work ethic but honesty, courtesy, concern for the other person, that was all just built in. I mean, that was just assumed and expected. It wasn't even things that people talked about or discussed. Everybody just sort of had a high moral caliber.

I think there's a lot of factors contributing to that. Maybe being from a small town had something to do with it. Maybe being from a large family where there were responsibilities of taking care of the younger ones had something to do with it. But the younger ones also had that same quality so it wasn't like the older ones had more responsibility and, therefore, had better characters.

But he finished his comment with a note of concern. For him, the good things of character that set Great Plains people apart were passing. In contrast to West River today, he saw himself growing up in isolation. "Do you know," he said, "that when I was ten years old we lived basically fifty-five miles from Glendive following the road and seventy-five miles from Dickinson following the road. That's not very far away and yet if I was in Dickinson and Glendive combined four times a year that would have probably been a lot."

Now, kids will jump in a car in Beach and go to a movie in Dickinson. The world is coming in and the morality that is presented to children through television or through the magazines or in the newspapers or on billboards has eroded. Everyone is becoming homogenized.

Frank's comments bring relief to the dilemma of character faced by all West River farmers. On the one hand, their sense of the good derives from a history of community separateness where character "was all just built in," growing out of everyday expectations and obligations in the manner of habits that required no comment. In one sense, "being good" was no more than an unconscious outcome of living a life without alternative. The hope of the grandparents and parents of today's West River farmers was that their way of living would continue unchanged as their children and grandchildren followed the same life. But the reality of farming in the semi-arid plains introduced the need to prepare for other worlds. Children leave and, for those who stay, "the world is coming in." The need to confront these new circumstances introduces a more conscious reflection on instilling character into generations who may go elsewhere.

The Moral Character of a Settlement Frontier

The area of North Dakota west of the Missouri River was some of the last to be settled in the state. The land is more rugged than in those eastern portions that shape the popular

perception of a relentlessly featureless expanse. Just east of Bismarck, the land begins its westward slope into the high plains, the broken badlands country, and the scattered buttes with names like Eagle's Nest, Rainy, Sentinel, and the Virgin's Breasts. And it's where the later immigrants to the United States after the closing of the frontier could still find open land. As Brother Ambrose put it, "The German-Russians were farmers. . . . They wanted to be nothing else but farmers and they were willing to work hard. They were willing to settle on the poorest land because they just figured that, you know, that they can make it."

These German-Russians are the descendants of immigrants whose ancestors had moved from Germany to Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great and who began to leave the Black Sea areas of Russia in the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century. Although people whose families came to the area between 1890 and 1910 dominate West River today, the country opened to intensive settlement with the Northern Pacific Railroad's crossing of the Missouri River at Bismarck in 1879. The earliest settlers were Yankees and Scandinavians who had far less attachment to the place and who tended to leave more quickly in hard times.

Before and between those hard times that seemed to come every decade or so, the West River Country was promoted as a land of infinite possibility--a huge empire of emptiness ringed with sky, awaiting only the application of labor before being converted into wealth and the seat of new metropolises rivaling those of the east. Much of the hype better served the ends of real estate speculators and the railroads who wished to convert the unfilled Jeffersonian grid into dollars. But the hype also settled into the imaginations of those who came to the region. In 1908, the Dickinson Commercial Club published a pamphlet intended to bring more people west:

[N]owhere upon this broad planet can the young, middle aged or old man, landowner or renter of the older states, or any woman, more easily gain a competence than by becoming a resident of this region. Thousands of people with less earthly possession than would fill a box car have . . . in three years established themselves in comfortable homes, have good crops and a few head of stock and are on the way to permanent prosperity and affluence. In this country a man's wealth as a rule is measured by the time he has resided in it--the longer he stays and attends to his business the more he is worth.

West River, was one of these towns. Located on the ridge forming the watersheds for the Heart and Knife Rivers, regular rail service commenced in 1882. Its post office was established in 1883, the same year that the town was platted and lots began to be sold. Town growth was slow until the turn of the century, speeding up in 1899 when the Benedictine Abbot Vincent Wehrle relocated his monastery from the northeastern part of the state to the town of West River, which he projected to become the center of a thriving German Catholic community that would dominate the region. The abbey became its own attraction for Catholic immigrants. West River became an almost entirely Catholic town, its skyline cut by the grain elevators on the south and, after 1908, by the twin spires of its Bavarian Romanesque abbey church on the north.

By the early 1930s the public school closed for lack of attendance because most people in town were sending their children to the parochial school. The small group of non-Catholics living in town either sent their children to Catholic school or transported them five miles west to

the next non-Catholic town. Nearly every person above 40 years old was educated in the Abbey or parish schools by Benedictine teachers. The renewed public school system opened in the early 1960s after a combination of legal battles threatened the unusual system in Catholic-dominated towns in which public school money supported parochial school teachers.

The halting increase of settlement during those earliest years may account for some of the breathless reports of land sales, expansion, and the business of farming in the local papers.

It's as though town merchants were shouldering a simultaneous burden of enticing newcomers while convincing those who had come to remain. The newspaper reports for the families around Joe Bauer's farmstead follow the script of progress and success:

June 25, 1909: "Peter Gress claims to have received \$855.00 for two wagon loads of wool this week and Lee Hoff \$810.18 for one load. That's going some. The past week has been a lively one for wool growers."

April 22, 1910: "Peter Gress has purchased a new Reeves steam plow rig and Tom Armstrong will run it this summer."

Feb. 10, 1911: "Peter Gress is remodeling the building at the west end of the lot on which the R. P. Gress residence stands, and will make a double house of it. The house will be modern, with bath and sewer and has already been rented to two families."

Even the undercurrent of failure when a family is forced out of farming from years of unpaid debt is whitewashed in the language of success. This same Peter Gress sold his farm just a few years later to Joe Bauer's grandfather, the private account of the transaction -- in which John Bauer agreed to take care of the accumulated debt -- differing markedly from the newspaper's story:

October 10, 1918: "Peter Gress sold 1038 acres, the largest portion of his land, to John Bauer who has recently moved here from Texas. On October 21st Mr. Gress will hold one of the largest auction sales in the history of Richardton and then he thinks he'll come to live in the city as a retired and wealthy private citizen. He has kept a half section of land for the time being."

Stories of Decline

In contrast to the boosterism that began the century, the refrain a hundred years later is one of decline. It is a fitting historical parallel that Euro-American settlers with their different motivations -- setting up religious commonwealths, ethnic homelands, healthy farmsteads -- shared something with the people that preceded them. West River sits in the middle of old Hidatsa and Mandan eagle trapping territory, the place where young men sought their visions on isolated buttes. The ancestors of today's West River people were moved by their own visions and dream quests that have been frayed by a few generations of hard reality.

In August, Joe Bauer and I walked his wheat field after an evening's random hail storm had turned its bumper crop to near total loss. Kicking through the broken stems and shattered heads, he spoke the slow cadences of resignation. I had wondered why, just a week before, he was reluctant to speculate about his harvest and here was the answer at our feet. It was a beautiful cloudless morning with a touch of coming Fall weather, almost crisp. The grain would

have been ready for harvest in just one more week. Joe was already saying that next year might be better and then he stopped and looked around at the hills and sky and his broken wheat. "Sometimes I ask myself," he said, "just why they stopped here. Why'd my grandpa think this was the place? Was it a broken axle on the wagon or what?" And then he laughed and we kept on walking.

Joe was half-joking out there in that field, but his joke turned on an inescapable story for all residents of the northern plains. Headlines from the area's two largest papers make this a more general tale of decline and concern that I think of as a litany of despair. Excerpts from a single month's worth of newspaper headlines during one part of my time in the field are a kind of found poem of packing up the landscape. "Small Towns Shrink," they announce; "Continuing to Dwindle," they proclaim; "Farm Sales Like Funerals," they close.

Today the entire southwestern region of North Dakota, an area 250 miles by 120 miles, is served by a single phone book about half the size of the one we use in the Michigan university town where I live. Most of these people continue to live in towns strung along the original Northern Pacific Railway line, now the Interstate 94 corridor. Nearly all these communities reached their peak populations twenty years and more ago and have been in steady decline since. Those further off the corridor began their declines earlier.

The results of population loss are the topic of daily conversation and are written in the physical space of closing schools, churches, hospitals, and businesses throughout the region. The high school principal gives his own account of these changes:

You look at the business: When I came to town thirty years ago we had two auto dealers. They're both gone. Two major implement dealers. One of those is gone and the other one will be closing up in September. There was a little clothing store, of course, and the grocery has really struggled and he has to compete with those two big stores in Dickinson. When I first came to town we had three in town. We had three service stations, and now we're down to one that doesn't even sell premium gas so I have to fill in Dickinson or Bismarck.

Well, let's see what else did we have when I first came to town? There were three bars and now they're down to one. And there was a bar and a restaurant in the bowling alley. So that's another thing, the restaurants. There were three of them. And now it's down to one. And that struggles too.

One little remarked upon change in the character of the county since the earliest population figures in 1910 is an almost complete reversal of the urban-rural distribution of its population. Sixty-five percent of the population lived on farmsteads and 35% in towns at that earliest year of record. Where section roads passed by a dense network of farmsteads and families in past years, today's countryside is littered with abandoned homesteads. Farm sizes have increased and the percentage of people living in the largest city today almost exactly tracks the percentage that once distributed itself across the countryside.

West River's history is mostly a history of leaving. By 1970, it began its steady loss of young people and population decline after edging up to its census peak of 799. Its 1990 population was 625. I looked at the graduating classes of 1973-1975, people in their mid-forties, and found that of the 100 (out of 116) people for whom I could find addresses only a

quarter still lived in West River or on its neighboring farms. When the high school principal assigned an essay to the graduating seniors of the class of 2000, only 3 out of 25 thought they would be living in the area five years from now.

While decline is partly a material event linked to the thinning population and poor farm economy, the way people talk about it goes beyond a simple recounting of the inevitable. Decline has a moral component, too. Just as the early booster literature emphasized that anybody of a certain character could make it in this country, West River people also link economic circumstances to character. The shrinking population base and the hollowed out main streets are taken to be indicators of moral failure.

Farming as a Way of Life

Robert Bellah and his colleagues write of the ways Americans think of work and its relation to the self in a culture of individualism. They distinguish work as a job, as a career, and as a calling along a continuum defined by its intersection with character. "In the strongest sense of a 'calling,' work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life" (1996: 66). Such work as calling joins the person to a larger community in which the meaning and value of work goes beyond profit or production.

Farming shares these attributes, but also goes beyond them. When we finished seeding one of his fields late at night, the two of us alone on hillside that once hummed with the shared labor and banter of six crews, Joe and I stood under the stars talking about the thinning out of the countryside. We were quiet for a while taking in the chill and the damp, when he turned to me and spoke. "I know the Lord made me for this. I just want to do it right is all." Joe's simple statement fills the criteria for work as calling, but where Bellah and his colleagues were concerned with individual commitments, farming goes beyond them to include a whole culture of relationships. It widens to encompass a shared way of life where the virtues of family and work are apparent to all.

These wider commitments introduce an embattled and contentious note to West River. The extent to which doing right is limited to the direct tasks of farming or to a wider universe of being and the content of farming as a way of life are sources of a dispute that runs along generational lines in West River. A fair description of the community must make note of changes that parallel those in the world beyond the plains. Marriages break down. Children grapple with the law and other problems. Single women in town openly raise their out of wedlock children. When Frank Falkenstein talked in the words quoted above of the "good, hard, strong work ethic" and the "honesty, courtesy, and concern for the other person" that he uses to characterize North Dakotans, he was quick to add that he was talking about the past, to the 1950s and 1960s. The problem as he sees it is that outside influences are making their way into West River and changing the culture.

While all agree that farming has changed, it's the older generation that makes the link between the business and production sides and the decline in character. Brother Ambrose was emphatic about the farming requiring a whole bundle of commitments that characterize a way of life:

Farming has never been easy. It's always been very, very tough but in the earlier days farmers were willing to be poor. Farmers used to be able to make a living because they

were willing to go without the luxuries and nowadays people are not willing to go without the luxuries. I mean, nowadays they have to have everything. You know, they go hunting in the fall, they go skiing in the winter and they take trips. And they have the biggest TV available and carpets wall to wall in the house and they have central air conditioning in the house and they have everything that anybody else has. I think that they should stop complaining. If they can't make it on the farm they should quit the farm and go to town and get a job. Go to the West Coast or whatever they have to do.

At the same time, even those younger farmers who might quibble about what counts as luxury regard themselves as having no less a commitment to a way of life distinguished from that of wage and salary workers in towns and cities. Growing up, Joe's reference point turned around the neighboring farms; today it's the whole United States. Although Joe and Marie live in a house with carpeting, have a fairly large color TV (but no cable), and a window air-conditioner that they set up every summer, they are as adamant as Brother Ambrose and Frank Falkenstein that farming confers a special character on its practitioners. Throughout the area, parents of Joe's generation say that a compelling reason for them remaining behind when so many have left is that their children will profit by being raised here. The sources of that conviction are in their own experience, as Craig made clear:

Every since I was this high I wanted to raise my kids up on the farm because I knew what it was like. I grew up on the farm. We had horses, we had cows, we had sheep, we had pigs, chickens, geese. I mean, you name it, that place had it. And we never had no money but we had the experience of working with all this stuff. And that was very important to me to raise my kids that way. And we've made a lot of sacrifices to do this but it's worth it to us. Our kids will be able to go out in the world and do any dang thing they want and they won't be afraid to do it.

Even those who talk about farming as a job, as a way to make a living, emphasize that in spite of the low pay, they can't imagine working for wages to another person's schedule.

Constructing a Way of Life

The elements of a way of life go beyond a single set of technical skills. Farming is notorious for its variety of tasks, some sequenced by season and others fit into the gaps between more time-laden jobs. West River's high school secretary grew up on a farm and continues to work with her husband in addition to her salaried work in town spoke about that punctuated variety:

Living on the farm as we do now there's such a swing of things. It's not like you're doing the same thing day in and day out every day of the year. And with our four seasons, every few months you're changing. It's like changing a job in what is required of you, so, I don't know, it's kind of, I have to say I enjoy it.

And beyond that, a feeling of belonging. As Craig expressed it:

After working in town and being there all the time and then getting out in the country, it was like a picnic. It was great. What we are doing today, and I'm sure you feel that, it gets to you. Maybe it's just the appreciation that other people get out of you helping them. When you'd come out, they were glad to see you, happy you were there, and you

couldn't screw up. No matter what you did there they were glad you were there because they were getting things done and you enjoyed being there.

The pieces that go into constructing a way of life include a set of ideas that link behavior, relationships, and internal virtues. In West River, people speak of these in terms of work, family, and the character defined by having a work ethic. These ingredients exist within a shared context that we can think of as a family farm culture. They depict internally necessary orientations within West River.

Work. Regardless of age or gender, the people I talked with rooted things in work. Not only is life unimaginable without working at something, but the absence of work signifies a kind of death. "I think work is very important and not just to have something to do. But I think work--for me, for anybody--work is life," as one man put it. Another man told me, "There's a time for work and a time for play. When it's time to work, you work, and when it's time to play, you play. I believe, dinking around, I can't handle that." And a woman put it similarly, "I think, you know, your life is your work."

But there are ways of talking about work, too, that suggest the special place it has in West River culture. My transcripts are rich in discussions of the topic, sometimes obliquely and sometimes head on. In all the different ways it gets discussed it is clear there are few better indicators of character. At one level, it's something that has to be done, a condition of being alive. The same man who talked about his family retaining a symbolic membership in West River by holding onto 14 acres out of three sections, 1920 acres, went on about the subject of work, too:

People who think they don't have to work ... I mean, I can't comprehend that. Who just want to exist or just want to read novels or something like that. I get very impatient with that and as you know there are people in the community who would be very content to just read novels all day. I think life demands work in some form or another. I'm not just talking physical work. There's all kinds of work, mental work, and writing, or whatever -- I have no problem with that as work. But work is very important and I personally don't think people tend to be balanced or happy without it.

Another man, one who moved his family back to North Dakota after time away from the state working in the finance offices of Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, gives another side of that inevitability of work. His comments followed an earlier discussion of his moving back and the realization that his kids would be marked by the place they spent their early years:

I think it does stand the North Dakotans in good stead because you learn. You are expected to accomplish, you have goals, you have demands placed on you and it's not like it's negotiable. You're eight years old and you drive the truck to town, for example. Well, there's no negotiating there; you just do it. Or, we've got this truck and the hoist is broke so you shovel the truck off if it's loaded with wheat. You don't shovel it half off. You just shovel it off because you have to meet a combine. You've got a deadline and people just have a good, strong work ethic.

These reflections suggest a possibility that the way work is viewed in this place grows out of its agricultural history. I think of the task orientation I saw repeatedly in the short time I was there. Haying needed to be done when the grass was ready and not before. Once started,

it needed to be finished. The oat harvest followed close on its heels. And then the wheat. No bucking the schedule and, once begun, whole families were out in the fields until it was finished.

The task orientation co-exists with others, though, and there's plenty of evidence of change. The orientation exists within a whole way of life and so another piece of the work story is whether it's viewed as a means to an end or something on the order of vocation. Younger farmers seemed to be struggling with that, to the extent that one young family I grew close to were talking in terms of pay per hours worked and calculating their annual take in those terms. This is a controversial way to do it, one that creates some tension between generations as the following reflections by an older farmer show:

And then others want to farm because it's a good place to raise kids. Well, that's true it's a good place to raise kids but what about the other ninety eight percent of the people who don't raise their kids on the farm? How did they do it? If the other ninety-eight percent are able to survive in town I think this two percent could also survive in town. So, I don't think it's worth the struggle they go through just to raise their kids on the farm.

These sentiments become physical in the posture of West River people at rest, no more evident than on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation when the farming population takes enforced respite from action at the Abbey Church that dominates the town. Men, especially, sit uncomfortably immobile during the Mass, their big hands held open as if in need of a wrench. At such moments, the Catholic practice of frequent rising, sitting, and kneeling appears to be a blessing.

There's no need to look far for the origins of this strong feeling about work. Every person I spoke with talked about its importance in setting the character of their lives. Whether they grew up in town or on the farm, nearly every person had the experience of farm work because of the overlapping kin and labor-sharing networks that tied townspeople to farm relatives. It's easy to see that most people grew up in a world that lacked room for idleness and the comments of older people are hard to distinguish from those in Joe's generation. For some, the sheer amount of activity was a source of humor, as with a retired 72 year old carpenter:

You grew up working all the time. I think my father stayed awake at night, you know, thinking of things for us to do. Oh, there was no such thing as hours! I mean, you just worked continuous--daylight to nightfall, you know?

Another man, now a medical doctor who lives in the small city near West River, and who grew up on a farm north of West River was similarly emphatic. He had gone away to medical school and had more opportunities than most to live a comfortable life away from the region, but returned to live as close to his home as he could because he felt more comfortable there. Even with the high income and free time of his profession, he takes on special tasks like building a porch that "kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger" to keep active. His memories of growing up were memories of work:

Anytime you weren't eating or sleeping, you worked. Very labor intensive, as farming was back in those days. Very labor intensive. We had a diversified farm so we raised pigs, we raised chickens, we had a few sheep every once in awhile, that was very unusual to keep them back then. We did grain farming, raised hay, and everything was very laborious. Our machinery was never top-of-the-line, modern machinery. It was

always older. In fact I can only remember a couple vacations when I was a kid. You just didn't do that.

Craig's wife Renae, a notably independent and competent member of the community, wakes up every day at 4:30 to have quiet time to get work done and think by herself. I remember sitting down to a late dinner at Joe and Marie's only to be interrupted by a phone call from Renae. One of her cows was having trouble calving and she needed help. Joe set down his fork without taking a bite and we rushed over together to give her a hand. "Renae never calls for help unless she means it," was Joe's explanation, "She hates taking help on little things." I asked her once about how work became so central for West River farmers.

Well you don't know a different life. When your parents told you this is something you have to do, then this is what you do because if you don't do it then the rest doesn't function. Everything that happens there is important in one way or another. And my dad's philosophy was, just because I was a girl didn't mean I couldn't do what the boys did. If I wanted to learn whatever, I mean I roped and did whatever the boys did because he felt that he didn't want me to ever have to rely on a man, and that's how we trained our daughter too. We taught her the same way.

Renae's comment begins to supply a reason for the emphasis on hard work beyond its self-evident value: work was a part of an economy of relations. It also broaches the subject of gender in a way indicative of changes in a local culture that involved clearly identified and separate roles for men and women.

The Working Family. Although it took city scholars a longer while to recognize the family nature of farm work and the central role women play in the farm economy, West River farmers are quick to point to the collective nature of the enterprise. Craig is especially aware of the impossibility of relying on one person:

I honestly don't know how we've been doing it. There's a lot of luck there and a lot of hard work. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. And we both have to want to be doing it. Oh, God. If one of us wanted to quit it would be done. There's no way you could stay. You see that time and time again. As soon as one of the two doesn't want to do it anymore the place either falls apart or there's a divorce or they just up and leave, they're just done. Because you can't do it alone. It's a partnership.

Joe's vision of the partnership of work and relationship is similarly expressed, but he links it directly to the quality of their family relationship, too, by contrasting their current relationship with the way it was during the time Marie supplemented the family income with a job at a community bank. When she was at the bank, he felt a distance because they couldn't share conversation about the content of their daily work:

And a lot of people can't imagine working with your wife day in and day out like I do but that's what, one of the strongest things that keeps us together. It's a great way to do things I think . . . Here we consult and talk about everything we do.

Marie follows up by emphasizing the inseparability of family and work and the complementary roles they fill in the farm economy:

When you're living this life it's a family thing or it doesn't work. We respect each other's territory, mostly. I do the household decisions, no doubt. That's obvious. And I let Joe make the decisions on the cropping, the insurance work, all those things. He just has a feel for it where I don't quite understand all of it. Although I'm learning more, I'm getting better at that. But he just has that, he just knows that stuff, and I just trust he'll make the right decision. And he doesn't step on my toes here either. He lets me do the management part how I want within the household, plus the business management, too. He sees that as, he doesn't care to even start looking at that.

Marie and Joe's comments point to the heavy reliance of the family farm way of life on gendered divisions of labor. As adept at the work of driving trucks and tractors, feeding cattle, and handling the calving as Marie and Renae are, they take these tasks on as additions to their other responsibilities within the household. Both of them bake for their families. Both of them handle the book work. Both of them also handle the emotional economy of the family enterprise. It's Marie who makes regular visits to Joe's grandmother at the hospital in West River, who surprises Joe on his birthday with a few days off a grueling schedule in a rented cabin in the badlands, who is alert to the needs of smoothing family tensions.

Early on in West River I asked Joe if there were any woman farmer-operators in the area. His response was a quiet double take and a look of wonderment as though he had never imagined such a thing. Still, although many West River residents point to a strongly held patriarchal culture that they call "German," it's no longer unusual to see women driving equipment. Men are as proud of their daughters' abilities in the field as they are of their sons. Craig's comments serve for an example, both of a growing acceptance of women in the field and of the relative novelty that makes it worth remarking:

[My daughter's] an equal, just like me and you. Just because she's a girl doesn't mean she can't do anything. She was driving pickup when she was six years old. She would drive along side, I had an automatic pickup and we'd fix fence. Me and her would go out together and fix fence. She'd put it in drive or in low and she'd idle along the fence and I'd walk and do whatever I needed to do. And I told her if she gets in trouble, you turn the key off. And that's what she would do. She'd turn the key off. And to start it she'd just turn it back on. Not a big deal. But that girl's got a lot of confidence. She'll go a long ways.

The Work Ethic. When farmers drive the section line roads and highways of West River, their eyes drink up the landscape the way most people read a newspaper. Nothing is more revealing of a person's character than the neat lines of a well-tilled field, the missed crop rows where a seeder was plugged, or the pockets of discoloration caused by weeds missed in the spraying. A sloppy field is a headline announcing a sloppy character.

A failed field is called a wreck and everybody gets a pass for one. Bob, nodding to our left from the pick-up toward a field overrun with the sturdy weed called kocia, said, "This is my wreck for the year." Craig's wreck that year displayed itself to the world in the field by the highway and every neighbor saw it on the trip back from town. Reading fields after seeding, Joe would joke about a missed row or a plugged line in the air seeder in those holes where black earth pooled like oil in an otherwise green field. There's no stealth to farming, no covering your tracks, where every crooked line and every gap with a sprayer gets inscribed for later reflection and casual commentary. This is one of the reasons that Joe will experiment with

unfamiliar crops in a back quarter bordering little used roads.

This concrete relationship between character and work encourages a special emphasis on the quality of work that West River people see as the presence of a work ethic. Although the classic American notion of the work ethic links it to the Protestant and upper class virtues hard work for self and community, its treatment as the unique property of a single class or culture is probably overdone. West River residents clearly speak of it in terms that connote the original spiritual goods that redound to individual and community.

On the one hand, the work ethic is a latent quality of character that will express itself as an internal virtue made public by action, as when Joe commented on his daughter's drive:

And I told her that once when we were talking -- she was always working -- and I said, "Some day that German work ethic's going to kick in on you and you're not going to be able to stop it. You're going to hate it but you're going to keep doing it." And it has. She's driven now. When she got in school, it was overwhelming for her and just to the point she couldn't take it. And she got through that first year and announced that she was taking summer classes. And now she has a job on the side and married and everything else and she's going for a music minor. It's in her whether she likes it or not. And I knew it would happen to her. Just knowing the type of person she is and where she came from, she's going to work.

On the other, it has to do with relationships between people that connote unstated obligations of quality, as the West River doctor implies:

Oh, I think work ethic, in my mind, means that if you have accepted the job, if you've accepted the responsibility, even if there's not a written contract, or even a verbal contract, there is an unwritten and unspoken agreement that you will do as good a job as you can. In return the person or employer will treat you fairly, too. I guess that's what I'm thinking. It's kind of like what I would hope would be an optimal physician-patient contract. Even though you never speak about these things, you in a sense agree to take the best care of the patient that you can and they agree to follow your advice, take your medications that you prescribe, and go through with what your recommendations are.

A very similar definition comes from another former West River resident in the professional world:

I guess to me it's just a standard of excellence, of doing above and beyond what people expect you to do. I guess if somebody expects you to do a certain level of work for them, or their client expects a certain level you do something the next level above that. If you're doing something extra that's going to be good for you in the long term. In the short run it keeps your client happy, it gives you repeat business, it gives you referrals. Just do above and beyond and do the best that you can. That's kind of how I approach it. You treat people like they're the most important person on earth. That's how you treat them. Because that's how you would expect to be treated if you were them. That's kind of how I approach it.

Both of these different emphases have in common a sense of something internal made concrete in action--in short a connection between character and work.

Crafting the Good Person in the Context of Change

*Those were the last years of the Agrarian City
City of swapped labor
Communitas
Circle of warmth and work
Frontier's end and last wood-chopping bee
The last collectivity stamping its feet in the cold.*

Thomas McGrath, Letter to an Imaginary Friend

When Joe and Craig were growing up, it was more or less assumed that some of the kids would stay to take over the farm. Working in the family economy was an unstated apprenticeship for a way of life. Contemporary life makes that a far less certain prospect. It isn't just West River that's losing people. The entire county loses population with every census. Farms grow bigger as the population thins. School districts consolidate. Businesses close. Joe watches quietly as yet another farmer shuts down and leaves the land and wonders, "Will I be next?"

Today, parents are compelled toward a more consciously planned upbringing for their children. Where Joe and Marie never went to college, they made a point of encouraging their own son and daughter to attend. Their son Will, one of the three people in his high school graduating class who intends to be in West River and can't imagine anything else but farming, is a reluctant conscript at the nearby regional college where he studies agricultural economics. Joe and Marie tried hard to get him to go to a college further from home, but compromised on his choice to stay near West River happy that he was giving it a try at all.

I opened this chapter with a quote from Iris Murdoch to emphasize the connection between everyday life and the ideas about "the good" that, though often unstated, give meaning to life. Unlike so many other forms of work in the United States, our image of farming comes to us as a complete package where individual character, family, and community join seamlessly to define how work and the good are one thing. In the face of threats to this way of life, the farmers I worked and talked with have more explicitly separated person and context. The good becomes something that is internalized and portable. Frank Falkenstein expressed some of this separation:

You asked me if it had bothered me that people leave West River. To leave West River just for the sake of West River doesn't have any meaning but the fact that they've got an education and they've gotten involved in different occupations that they're interested in, that they find fulfillment from, is important. The work itself, is not important. The fact that the work is part of what helps them grow as an individual in their overall development and their walk through life is what's important and wherever that occupation takes them to is fine. You know, I really don't care where it is if it's helping them grow as a person.

In the changing world of West River, farming gets viewed as an advantaged preparation

for a probable life away. Renae spoke for a widely shared view that incorporates that note of preparation with an air of sacrifice:

So we're telling the kids, see, we're giving you something that lots of kids will never ever have. And I don't want them to feel like they owe me for that, but we have sacrificed a lot for those kids to have this life. And I think they have thrived by doing this. They can go out in the world and do anything. They know so many things. Town people, no offense to town people but, a lot of them have such a narrow idea of what the world really is. If it isn't in a book or it isn't this way, they don't understand that and my kids have the best of both worlds because they know what it's like to work harder or farm or have.... I don't know, it's just a whole different way of life. You know so many things. You know the reaction of one thing to the other. You're aware of the weather, not because, "well, it's raining today, I can't play softball." That just doesn't happen here. They're more aware of what the real world is like. And I think when they go out into the world they will be able to relate to so many different things because they've had this.

Growing up on a farm becomes valuable for the virtues of realism, practicality, and internal character that it instills. Renae continued:

I want them to be able to go out in the world and not be afraid to work for what they want. I want them to know honesty. That's a big thing in this household. I would rather hear an ugly truth than a fantasy. Fairy tale just doesn't get it. And the kids have, as far as I know, have been very honest. And loyal and committed to what they do. We're very committed to this or we wouldn't be doing this. So I think by them seeing how committed we are that they can be committed to something when they go off into the world, too. And whatever that is, that's their choice. I don't care what my children decide to do. Just so that they go out and work hard at it. Apply themselves. Don't think that you can go out and just get paid for looking at the stars. I'm sure people get paid to do that but my children probably aren't going to. The real world. So I want them to go out and be able to make themselves a living. And be good people. Go into a community, if it's not this one, go into a community and be good people.

I asked her about this idea of the good, the word that brings us full circle to Iris Murdoch. Renae didn't miss a beat in her reply:

Good people. Someone who works hard, someone who's honest, probably those two major things. Someone who doesn't think about themselves all the time. They're willing to help someone out or give of themselves and not be afraid that they're not getting anything back.

This new world of preparation has its continuities with the way of life in West River, but the focus is on internal qualities that are not necessarily shared by others. Nor will character be so easily reflected in the concrete ways that West River fields can reveal to the attuned eye. Where all farmers share the same modes of work and are better or worse at it, those who leave West River will pursue different careers and will live in a more varied context.

Anthropologists are reluctant retailers of solutions. We see everyday life and document it, observe change and avoid judgment. Nevertheless, any discussion of people's lives in the depopulating northern plains is a discussion with a genealogy going back to the original soul of

America. Thomas Jefferson had an idea that he was sure would give solidity to American democracy. Part of that idea involved the very elements of character expressed by the people of West River. To talk of these people is to talk of a cultural tradition that has fed America's ethic throughout its history. This is not a simple question of economics. These are cultural questions for which we have, as yet, few established traditions of approach.

The first thing to catch the eye of most visitors to my office at the University of Michigan is a large rock, about the size of a misshapen and slightly deflated soccer ball. It sits on my desk balanced on a tripod constructed of the bent and welded steel fingers from the inside of a combine's header. It isn't so much the rock that catches the eye as the bold inscription, "Tom, You Suck!" inked onto the side. The rock arrived in a heavy UPS package a few months after one of my returns to Ann Arbor from West River. I had no idea what could be in a box with that kind of heft but pulled it open and recognized it right away. It was the rock I picked up with Joe's combine when we harvested Craig's wheat just east of town. Joe made the stand in his shop using the same fingers I managed to bust in the field. They must have looked hard to find that rock because I heaved it as far into the weeds along the fence line as I could. Will's first words to me when I pulled out of the field for repairs are those very ones inked onto the rock. It holds a place of honor in my office, signed by the whole crew I worked with that day, reminding me that anthropology isn't just reading the classics.

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