



A Wonderful Life

In Praise of Small Towns

In a few weeks, my family and I will be leaving the small town where we've lived for almost two years. Amidst the packing and the farewells, I've been rushing around with my camera, trying to capture on film the essence of this special place. But I've realized that what makes small towns special can't be photographed.

In a small town you get to know people you'd never meet in a city, and you get to know them well. You see someone in church and meet again in the library. You find you have friends in common. You borrow cups of sugar from neighbors. You start hoping your daughter gets a crush on a friend's son—in a few years! But in a small town, it's easy to think long-term.

Our town has a central common and town meetings and big white houses on a hill. It has a Memorial Day parade that ends with a touching ceremony at the cemetery. It has a post office that looks like a Currier and Ives print, and there's a Christmas concert with a brass quintet.

Living here has been a little like being in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. One can almost imagine George Bailey walking down our main street, saying hello to everyone. O.K., I'm romanticizing a little. In the last 15 years, Main Street has become heavily trafficked, and because the town is quite close to an urban center, it's changing faster than it would like. But it is still a community, and it has given us a life I thought wasn't possible anymore: an old-fashioned life.

When we first moved here, I missed the excitement of the big city; I missed, even, the anonymity and lack of responsibility city life allows. Small towns demand commitment and time. If you miss the town meeting, the residents might be one vote short of blocking the proposed fast-food restaurant. If you skip the senior citizens' dinner, who will serve the coffee? These are not life-shattering responsibilities, but they are the glue that holds a community together. In return, you know you are needed.



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Small-town life is built on the simple good-heartedness of people who have decided to devote the time required to make a place their hometown. It is no coincidence, I think, that as Americans have less time, we have fewer small towns. Instead, there are big cities and sprawling suburbs, with no questions asked—and no favors, either.

So why are we moving? For very modern reasons: a career change, an opportunity. Solid enough, yet I wonder if my generation hasn't moved more frequently than is good for us. Since I left home for college 17 years ago, I have lived in 17 different places. My husband runs a close second at 14. We are the exact opposite of George Bailey, who stayed in his hometown and discovered there what life is all about. For us, life is all about leaving. And once we leave the original place we called home, it's as if we can't stay *anywhere* long enough to call it home. And so small towns are deserted, swallowed up as we move in search of new lives and bigger salaries. Ultimately, I fear the tangibles we've gained won't make up for the intangibles we've lost. When you don't belong to a place, the temptation is not to care about it either.

For a while my husband and I wavered about leaving here, even though he would miss a chance for advancement. But I knew we would eventually resent the trade-offs of staying even more than the fact of going. And so we are moving to a pretty suburb, a sane alternative to urban life. But it's not a small town. Suburbs, after all, are satellites, places with no center, revolving around the cities they serve.

I mourn our leaving doubly because I worry that this town may not win the battle to keep itself to itself. But it is prepared to fight, as small towns must if they are to survive. As for us, I hope we will find another town to settle in someday. For I am growing weary of sending down roots that are pulled up just when they begin to anchor us to a place. In a small town, a hometown, they will have a chance to send off shoots that seek the light. ■

What do you think? Address your letters to "Full Circle,"
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Phillip Cassidy