

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SOMEWHERE

by Scott Russell Sanders

From reading a book of mine called *Staying Put*, Dan Shilling knows I believe that Americans gad about too much. Our ceaseless mobility burns up the Earth's dwindling supply of petroleum, destabilizes the climate, enslaves us to tyrannical regimes in the Middle East, embroils us in war, buries more and more of our landscape under pavement, and shatters our communities. I don't wish to encourage any more idle movement. So I would appear to be an odd choice as an opening speaker at a conference on tourism—just how odd, you can decide after you've heard what I have to say.

Too often, tourism is only another form of shopping, treating the whole country as a gigantic mall offering trinkets and distractions for sale. Too often, it is driven by a yen for golfing or gambling, a craving for novelty or scenery, or by simple boredom. If we're going to rove about the continent, burning up oil and jeopardizing our grandchildren's future, we ought to be prompted by larger motives. Can tourism become something more meaningful and rewarding not only to travelers but also to the places they visit and the home places to which they return? I hope so; I believe so; and that is why I traveled from Indiana to speak here today.

When I accepted Dan's invitation, I told him I would explore three main ideas; let me list them now so you will know where I am headed. First, I will consider why so many American towns and cities feel like jumbles rather than communities, without pattern or purpose. Second, I will sketch some of the qualities that give certain places a distinctive, captivating character. Finally, I will propose that, having experienced the integrity, vitality, and beauty of another place, we should return home inspired to foster those qualities in our own communities.

What I'm arguing is that tourism at its best can be a kind of vision quest, in which we journey away from the familiar world to encounter some alien setting, some natural or cultural or spiritual presence that enlarges our understanding, and then we journey home to act out that larger vision in our households, neighborhoods, towns, and cities. As in a mythic quest, what begins as a private search ends up enhancing the life of the tribe. If that sounds like a grand comparison, well, it is meant to be grand, but also attainable and compelling.

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Let me begin, then, by suggesting why so many of our towns and cities fail to provide those who live there, as well as those who visit, with a vibrant sense of place. What it means to lack a sense of place was memorably expressed by the writer Gertrude Stein. On a return trip to the United States after years of living in Europe, Stein visited Oakland, California, where she had grown up. She could find no trace of her childhood home, no durable landmarks at all, leading her to remark that she could not imagine settling down and writing in Oakland, for "there is no there there."

Whether Stein's judgment was fair in the 1930s, when she voiced it, or whether it is fair now, I can't say, since I have never set foot in Oakland. But her judgment strikes me as all too true of many American cities and towns, where any sense of character or coherence has been eroded by the forces of development. Uniform highway design, strip malls, cookie-cutter suburbs, manufactured housing, garish franchise architecture, and box stores surrounded by deserts of blacktop have made our settlements less and less distinct from one another. The mass media contribute to this homogenizing of America by smearing across the land a single, sleazy imagery whose overriding goal is to grab our attention and sell it to sponsors, and whose underlying goal may be to mold our minds into thinking as the owners of the media wish us to think. Chains of radio stations play the same music and recite the same headlines; chains of newspapers print the same articles; chains of bookstores feature the same books; cable and satellite networks beam the same programs from Florida to Alaska. Over the airwaves, on billboards and T-shirts, through computers and phones, the usual products are peddled coast to coast. As a result of these trends, we spend more and more of our lives in built environments or in virtual environments that are monotonous, ephemeral, rootless, and ugly.

Here in the heart of Prescott, it's easy to imagine that I exaggerate. But for every Prescott or Portland or pre-Katrina New Orleans, for every Santa Fe or Sitka, for every Beacon Hill or Greenwich Village or Chinatown there are hundreds of American places that have lost touch with their past, have cut themselves off from their surrounding landscape, have succumbed to the blight of sprawl; and even in Prescott, if you venture out from the town center, you will see the same corrosive influences at work.

Every now and again, here and there, citizens will rise up on their haunches and defend their turf against invasion by Wal-Mart, McDonald's, or some other Goliath; but Goliath never sleeps, never takes no for an answer, never runs out of money or political friends, and eventually the giant gets its way. So the homogenizing of America goes implacably on, street by street, real estate parcel by parcel, restaurant by office by store, and we adjust to this regimentation in the same way that we adjust to rising levels of pollution, congestion, violence, and noise. Over the past half century, we have surrendered to the tyranny of automobiles, as if their care and feeding were the central purpose of cities, and we have allowed our home places to become the colonies of global corporations, which bear no connection to local history, culture, or terrain. The resulting desolate hodgepodge is what James Howard Kunstler has called "The Geography of Nowhere."

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One cannot feel delight or pride in a place, a sense of belonging to a place, or a concern for the well-being of a place, if "there is no there there." So it's not surprising that the erosion of our towns and cities has coincided with a retreat by Americans from civic life. The two trends reinforce one another. Our communities turn into jumbles because not enough people are looking after them, and ever fewer people are willing to look after places that have lost their souls.

The retreat from civic life has been documented by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart*, by Daniel Kemmis in *Community and the Politics of Place*, and by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, to mention a few examples of a growing literature. Whatever the reasons for this cultural shift, in recent decades increasing numbers of Americans have been withdrawing from involvement with local schools,

clubs, and cultural institutions; giving up their subscriptions to local newspapers; abandoning main street merchants in favor of chain stores; neglecting to vote in local elections and otherwise ignoring community politics, except to demand lower taxes. The burgeoning megachurches may seem to be an exception to this trend, but they are in fact a symptom of it, for they tend to focus on personal salvation rather than service to one's neighbor, on heavenly bliss rather than earthly renewal.

And as we retreat from civic life, where do we go? Into the cocoon of private consumption, which often necessitates longer working hours and second jobs; into therapy of one sort or another; into drink and drugs and other chemical pacifiers. Year by year, we spend less time outdoors interacting with neighbors or observing nature, more time in air-conditioned cars negotiating traffic or indoors transfixed by the electronic never-never land flickering on screens. Those screens tell us, through relentless advertising, that our pleasure, appearance, comfort, and status matter more than anything else; they tell us that the earth exists to satisfy our cravings; they tell us that we alone, out of all species and all generations, are the ones who count; and the voracious ego in each of us nods in agreement.

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Can tourism serve as an antidote to narcissism and homogenization? Can it draw us out of our self-preoccupation and revive our concern for the public realm? Can it help us recover or create a vital sense of place in our communities, whether or not they are tourist destinations? Can it help transform us from consumers into stewards? Those, I believe, are the key questions we have before us here in Prescott.

As I said at the outset, much tourism is only a far-flung shopping trip, yielding photographs or floor shows or a winter tan. Except for differences in climate or scenery, one shopping destination scarcely differs from another. Travelers return from such expeditions lighter in the wallet but otherwise unchanged. The kind of tourism that interests me, the only kind I am willing to advocate, would challenge and inspire travelers by providing them with experience of a real place, a distinctive place, a place with its own history, culture, and texture. This is what I imagine civic tourism to be—an immersion of the traveler in the geography of *somewhere*.

What are the qualities that make a town or city feel not like a generic outpost of the mall of America but like someplace in particular, with its own character and charisma, a place worthy of a tourist's deep engagement and of a citizen's love? To offer a comprehensive list of such qualities would take far more time than I have. So let me sketch a few of the features that distinguish real places from phony ones.

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A real place feels as though it belongs where it is, as though it has grown there, shaped by weather and geography, rather than being imported from elsewhere and set down arbitrarily like a mail-order kit. The connection to geography shows up in building materials, such as the adobe of Arizona and New Mexico, the cedar of Oregon, the limestone of Indiana, or the pine of Georgia and Maine; it shows up in architecture, such as the shady verandas of the Gulf Coast, the passageways linking house to barn in New England, the silos and grain elevators jutting from the prairie horizon of the Midwest, or the steel roofs on the rainy west flanks of the Cascade Mountains; and it shows up in food, such as Boston clam chowder or New Orleans gumbo or Milwaukee beer or Kansas City steak.

A real place is also distinguished by a vigorous local economy, one that draws on resources from the region and on the skills of its own citizens. Key enterprises, from factories to coffee shops, reflect the taste and judgment of the local people who own them, rather than the dictates of distant corporations. Although such an economy may produce goods and services for sale in the global market, it begins by serving the needs of the community, for jobs and healthcare as well as for food, shelter, clothing, and entertainment. Dollars spent in the community circulate there for a spell, instead of being immediately whisked away to some remote headquarters.

Visitors will know they have arrived in a real place when they deal with clerks who do not wear uniforms, when they find in shops well-crafted articles whose makers live nearby, when they discover on restaurant menus dishes they could not order anywhere else. They will know they have arrived in a cherished place when artists choose not merely to live there but to photograph and paint it, to write and sing of it; when archaeologists and historians delve into its past; when naturalists keep track of the local flora and fauna; and when elders pass on all of this lore to the young.

A real place conveys a sense of temporal depth, a sense that people have been living and laboring here for a long time. The traces of earlier generations are preserved in festivals and folkways and habits of speech; in old buildings that have been restored and kept in service; in landscapes that are still devoted to orchards, dairies, woodlots and other traditional uses. While honoring the past, a real place is not trapped there, the way Colonial Williamsburg, Plymouth Plantation, Dearborn Village, and other historical reconstructions are frozen in time. A real place is alive and changing, like any organism, gaining and losing residents, tearing down and building up. Yet there is continuity amid the change. However shiny the new surface of a dynamic city or town, it does not obliterate the deeper layers. New construction harmonizes with earlier architecture. New practices acknowledge older customs. Newcomers learn from old-timers.

Although a place like Taos or Tucson is in danger of being smothered by the effects of its own charm, the charm endures, and it has much to do with the layered presence of Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo influence, a tumultuous history stretching back over centuries. In a nation still relatively new, reminders of the past are all the more precious. Visitors stroll the avenues of Oak Park, Illinois, to see among the recent houses a handful of lovingly preserved homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright; they flock to Philadelphia to see, in the midst of flashy newness, the Liberty Bell or the gravestone of Ben Franklin or an eighteenth-century Quaker meetinghouse; they journey to spots in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois to see traces of Lincoln, and they range from Gettysburg to Vicksburg in search of Civil War battlefields. Tokens of the past may be newly-built, such as the arch at St. Louis commemorating Lewis & Clark's journey of discovery, or the reconstructed boats in Green River, Utah, modeled after those used by John Wesley Powell on his descent of the Colorado. We glimpse a past reaching back more than a thousand years in the architecture and lifeways of Hopi pueblos or Tlingit villages, and we sense an even deeper past among the ancient earthworks of the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries, as at Cahokia in Illinois or the Serpent Mound in Ohio.

Even when the history is troubling—as it is in the massacre site at Wounded Knee or the slave market of Charleston or the whaling wharfs of New Bedford or the industrial ruins of Pittsburgh—we are better off knowing the history than ignoring it, and each of these places is more engrossing for having preserved a record of its past. The presence of

history, good and bad, not only enriches our experience of place, it also reminds us that we who are alive now suffer as well as benefit from the actions of our ancestors, and that our actions, in turn, will affect those who come after us. Americans need such a reminder now more than ever, as we add nearly half a trillion dollars each year to the national debt our children will have to repay, as we use up natural resources at an accelerating rate, and as we degrade the biosphere.

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A real place keeps us mindful of nature, as it keeps us mindful of history. In the built environment one feels the presence of the living environment—in parks, gardens, bike and pedestrian trails, river corridors, beaches, urban forests, and yards given over to native plants, and in all the creatures, from crows to coyotes, that share the place with our two-legged kind. Imagine New York City without Central Park, or Chicago without the lakefront, or Madison without the arboretum. One cannot think of Lexington, Kentucky, apart from the necklace of bluegrass horse farms, or of Moscow, Idaho, without the rolling doeskin hills of the Palouse, or Denver without its view of the Rockies, or San Francisco without the Bay.

Although we can't summon up spectacular settings for our home places, we can make the most of whatever nature gives us. In recent years, Providence has uncovered the rivers that flow through downtown, Louisville has restored the riverfront along the Ohio, Indianapolis has built a string of parks beside the White River, Cleveland has become reacquainted with Lake Erie; and in doing so, each city has reclaimed some of its identity. Even if our home grounds are not blessed with big rivers or great lakes, we can support land trusts and local governments in their efforts to expand the amount of green space in our communities; we can turn abandoned railway lines into trails and turn vacant lots into gardens; we can plant trees along our streets; we can replace our lawns with native shrubs and wildflowers and ferns; we can grow food for birds and butterflies as well as for ourselves; we can create ponds and prairies in our school grounds, enabling children to play safely in patches of wildness; we can limit sprawl, so that open country remains within reach of city dwellers; we can shade outdoor lights and clean up the air and welcome the stars back into our night skies.

A community can also maintain its link to the countryside by feeding itself at least partly from nearby sources—often through farmers' markets, where local produce is sold directly by growers to eaters, instead of being shipped hundreds or thousands of miles. If you were to visit my hometown of Bloomington, for example, depending on the season, you could walk with me among market stalls heaped with corn, fragrant cantaloupes, gourds the size of bushel baskets, eggplants like giant purple tears, and beeswax candles smelling of meadows. You could gather the whole alphabet of fruits and vegetables, from apples to zucchinis, or a bouquet of gladiolas, poppies, lotus blossoms, and phlox. You could listen to musicians playing reggae, rock-and-roll, classical, or Afro-pop. You could sign petitions, register to vote, question political candidates, or volunteer to work for a local cause. And you could watch all manner of people, from grizzled quarriers in bib overalls to executives in suits to college students in cut-off jeans to Tibetan Buddhist monks in burgundy robes, all milling together, their faces radiant with joy, as they fill their bags and arms with bounty. They talk, touch, greet friends, dandle babies, exchange notes and promises; they shelter from the rain under pavilions or tilt their faces to the sun.

In those faces you can read the pleasure that draws humans together into villages and cities, the delight in sharing words, food, beauty, and laughter.

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This delight in the company of other people, so evident in farmers' markets, is another quality of captivating places. Unlike the private, often exclusive conviviality of clubs, the conviviality I'm talking about is *public*, open to people of all ages and classes and descriptions. A vital community provides many gathering spots, from auditoriums and barbershops and cafes to playgrounds and plazas and parks, where people are free to mix with neighbors and strangers; the more diverse the mixture, the more illuminating the experience is likely to be. As far back as we can trace human settlement, our ancestors created public spaces for the exchange of goods and ideas, such as the bazaars and courtyards of the ancient Near East or the agorae of ancient Greece. Here in America, town halls and village greens helped shape the ideals of democracy. Insofar as we have kept those ideals alive, we have done so through creating arenas where all citizens can enter and all voices can be heard.

A shopping mall is a poor imitation of these convivial places. True, anyone may enter, but the space is owned by a corporation rather than by the community. It is not designed to bring people together but to separate them from their money. The stores, which may be found in hundreds of other malls, bear no relation to geography. None of the goods for sale was locally produced. None of the food served in the restaurants was locally grown. The recipes, like the window displays and piped-in music, have been imposed from some distant headquarters. There is no freedom of assembly, as you can find out by trying to protest the sale of sweatshop products or fur coats, and there is no freedom of expression, as you can find out by trying to circulate a petition against our nation's latest war. Unlike an open-air market, a shopping mall is cut off from the weather, the seasons, the cycles of daylight and dark; it might as well be a spaceship, for all the connection it has to the community or the planet.

In a genuine gathering space, people from all walks of life may argue and joke and swap stories and admire one another's babies and sympathize with one another's aches, all the while feeling at home. Indeed, such gathering spots extend our sense of home beyond the four walls where we happen to sleep. The true wealth of a community shows up not in the grandeur of private residences but in the quality of libraries, schools, museums, parks, courthouses, galleries, and other public arenas.

It should go without saying that we encounter real places not by gazing through windshields or by gaping at screens but by walking. Alluring places invite us to immerse ourselves, to open all our senses. Sidewalks become more important than streets; parks become more important than parking lots. On foot, we experience the world in three dimensions; we move at a speed that allows us to absorb and savor and reflect. By comparison, the world presented by the electronic media is disembodied, stripped down, anemic. To compensate for that impoverishment, the virtual world must become ever more hectic and sensational if it is to hold our attention. The actual world, the three-dimensional array of sights and textures and tastes and sounds that we find in a vibrant city or town, needs no hype in order to intrigue us.

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What all of us long for, I suspect, is to love the places in which we live and to live in places worthy of love. Surrounded by sham and disarray, we hunger for integrity and

authenticity. We wish to dwell *somewhere* rather than *nowhere*. The list of qualities that distinguish a real place from a phony one might be greatly extended. But I hope I have said enough to suggest why cities and towns endowed with a rich, deep, coherent sense of place might inspire visitors to nurture similar qualities back home. By carrying home the benefits of a journey, we complete the circle, we pass on the gift.

Tourism can be truly “civic,” rather than merely another form of private consumption, only if it preserves and celebrates the commonwealth in the place visited as well as the place to which the visitor returns. “Commonwealth” is a venerable word that has fallen out of use in our hyperindividualistic culture. On television, in advertising, from board rooms and podiums, we hear incessantly about private wealth, but we rarely hear about the wealth we share. Yet the well-being of individuals and of communities utterly depends on that shared wealth—clean air and water, fertile soil, good schools and libraries, safe streets, honest government, a fair system of laws, an abundance of public lands, access to the world’s accumulation of knowledge and art, and countless other blessings that we inherit by virtue of our membership in the human family. Insofar as tourism enhances the commonwealth, it is a blessing; insofar as it depletes the commonwealth, it is a curse.

Tourism worthy of being called “civic” would show us the lives people lead together in a place, how they cooperate, make decisions, solve problems, enjoy one another’s company, and look after their home ground. It would renew our appreciation for the security that arises from neighborliness and mutual aid. It would encourage us to think about our cities, towns, and countryside as arenas for our common life, and not merely as patchworks of private property. It would remind us that we are responsible for the care of our communities, for the health of the land, and for one another. In short, civic tourism would educate us to become better citizens, first of our neighborhoods and ultimately of our nation and planet.

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If my hopes seem high, perhaps you will understand why, when I tell you that I became a grandfather not quite three years ago. The birth of that child set me thinking even harder about our responsibility to future generations. We have been given much, especially those of us with the freedom to travel, and we should feel duty bound to preserve the sources of those gifts. We should do everything we can to reinvigorate our waning democracy and to heal our damaged land. I realize that a revival of citizenship, with a renewed concern for the commonwealth, will require more than the most virtuous forms of tourism. But I also believe that civic tourism, rightly pursued, might help us turn toward a saner, kinder, more peaceful and equitable world. That is the world I want for my granddaughter, and for all children forever.