

## **A LIFE LOST: THE TENSIONS BETWEEN LOCAL ATTACHMENTS AND COSMOPOLITAN ATTRACTIONS**

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### ABSTRACT

This retrospective on a multigenerational farm family calls upon the author's life experiences to describe the microcosm of a local rural culture. The author uses narrative to consider sense of place and the impact it exerts on native-born locals. Considering the nonmigration of an extended family of third-generation rural cousins who live and farm within 25 miles of land belonging to the family for more than a hundred years, the story contrasts local and cosmopolitan values, raises issues about attempts to "leave home," describes the tension created when rurals try to become part of both worlds, and examines the stranglehold of primary attachments in the rural South. The author develops the theme that education, critical thought, can facilitate the struggles to maintain the primacy of place while successfully connecting to the cosmopolitan world. This balancing act, described as *ruralibrium*, requires the recognition of the "goods" in both worlds--the liberal, loosely controlled, urban, academic, cosmopolitan milieu and the conservative, controlled, "practical," rural community that exerts its pull through strong primary attachments. It is the mastery of this ruralibrium dance that allows the rural to leave home, and return safely.

My cousin Bobby Lee<sup>1</sup> died recently. He was 51. Bobby had gone to college, played football, worked as a title researcher, poured concrete, lived in ten states, married four times, manufactured methamphetamines, and fathered a child. Yet after his many attempts to escape the pull of his home, of trying to leave his "place," he had finally given in, only a few months before, and returned, penniless, to live with his mom and dad in the house of his birth. His death shortly later was reportedly due to "natural" causes, but the family knew his esophagus had been eaten away by the meth he had inhaled over the years.

I sat in the funeral home quietly watching as family members and friends moved into the room, viewed the body, and met his (estranged) wife at the casket. I wondered how a bright, physically endowed, talented young man could have met such a death, ending essentially how and where he had started. Why could he not leave the farm he claimed to dislike so much? Why was he so tied to the place he had tried so hard to leave? What was this attraction of the "local" and why had it been such a powerful force in his life?

My focus switched from Bobby; I now watched a circle of my cousins talking in the center of the room. How, I thought, had the rest of us fared in leaving our rural

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect the privacy of living persons.

heritage behind as we struggled with the pull of the local and the draw of the cosmopolitan? What adjustments had we made to balance the tensions between “home” and “world?” Had we been able to leave the farm? Had we been able to return?

### **Growing up Family**

There were twelve of us cousins: born to four brothers and a sister who were direct descendants of the earliest settlers in Kentucky. The firstborn cousin, my sister Joan, disabled from birth, now lives in a sheltered home about an hour away; my other sister, Esther, died at birth. Another cousin, Mickey, died as a teen in an automobile accident. Notably, of the remaining eight of us, seven now live on or adjacent to land belonging to our family for more than a hundred years. All eight of us still own and live on land within twenty miles of where our parents were born. Remarkably, all of us, despite the depressed rural economy, rely on farming as a primary source of income.

Though I did not learn how to articulate it, or even conceive of it, until almost fifty years later while conducting my doctoral research, by the age of seven my reality was firmly ensconced in a sense of place, this rural community. Like a tightly wound spring, the nearer I was to the center (primary family), the more rigidly my perception of reality adhered to the dictates of that place. As I grew older and farther away from my family, physically and ideologically, the less resolute my obedience became and the more global my vision was. For someone born in a southern farm family such as mine, the natural movement away from that restricted, tradition-bound center is often impeded by long-held, revered rural values. As the adolescent matures into adulthood, the shift from primary allegiance to secondary affiliations may lead, if not recognized and accommodated, to unanticipated, potentially damaging consequences (Asa 1995; Tucker 2004).

### **Local and Cosmopolitan**

Local vs. cosmopolitan (Flango and Brumbaugh 1974; Zetterberg 1966) can best be understood by considering the value system and the social dynamic of a group—what has worth and how people move on the social ladder. At one end of the scale, at the tight center of the spring, values are specific, often unique. They are particular to the place, to the local, and usually emphasize the primary family, the family of birth, in assigning prestige to individuals. Attitudes are typically bound to the values of the community. At the other end of the scale, on the outside fringes of the spring, values are more general, attitudes more tolerant, rules less severe,

visions more global, the social order more steeped in the dynamics of secondary relationships that are so prominent in modern society, particularly large urban enclaves.

Fundamentally, three catalysts for primary tensions within the rural environment are Practical Skills vs. Academic Intelligence, Male Rights vs. Human Rights, and Family Values vs. Global Stewardship. Utilizing my family as a source of historical capital, the effects of these opposing values on life in a rural setting are illustrated in the study by making explicit the adjustments to the pull of local attachments, the lure of cosmopolitan attractions, and the accommodation to conflicting forces as individuals find their place within the community and their rank on the social scale.

### **Practical Skills vs. Academic Intelligence**

The four of us able-bodied girl cousins assumed our assigned roles, learning the practical skills of sewing, canning, and gardening. Because the physical labor of farming was considered too demanding of a female, we were relegated to the kitchen, laundry room, and garden for most of our career-path training. From about the time I was six or seven, Grandma Wilson frequently invited the four of us and Joan to “slumber parties.” We scattered out in the middle of her living room floor on thick, brightly colored, handmade quilts. For “fun” she provided us yards of gingham check, intricate toile, and tiny print cotton material with the earthen smell of storage, along with small, geometric-shaped, cardboard templates for piecing quilt blocks. To encourage our dedication to task, she often held competitions to see who could make the smallest or closest stitches. Winners were often rewarded with a big bowl of freshly-popped, hot, buttered popcorn.

One year I picked a blue and white gingham check and a white solid for my bird-at-the-window piece, and, driven by my competitive spirit, I attempted to be the best at this ancient and respected folk art. However, the tiny, sharp, quilting needles with even tinier eyes were all but impossible for me to master since I was nearly blind in one eye and limited in the other. Because I worked mostly by feel, I won few of the competitions. That made quilting bees intensely frustrating and distressing for me. I so wanted to be outside, running and romping, playing cowboys and Indians, saving the wild West. However, I knew any disrespect shown to my grandmother would merit a whipping from my father, so quietly, agonizingly, I sewed.

Mom Wilson was a matriarch in the truest sense of the word. She ruled her household and her family (in the areas deemed under her womanly domain) with an

iron fist. The awesome power with which she controlled her daughter, four sons, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, sisters, bothers, and younger aunts and uncles in matters of hearth and home belied the fact that she was a very young grandmother of stocky but petite stature. Only 4'11", she married on Christmas Day at the age of fifteen and delivered her first child the following Christmas Day.

Grandma's name was Rosie—a tribute to the bright red hair and fiery disposition she had from birth. Her domineering spirit was equaled by her tenacity and positive outlook; she saw absolutely no reason to sit and “mope” about anything. “Might's well git up an' do sumthin' as t' sit 'round 'n belly ache!” From the age of 23, she donned her daily uniform—a raggedy white apron attached to the front of her long, dark, house dress with large silver safety pins—and tended to her chores with single-mindedness and without complaint. Rosie planted/tended a huge garden, made shirts, pants, and dresses for a family of seven, laundered clothes on a washtub scrub board, cooked meals on a coal stove, and reared five children through the Depression. Her duties included weeding crops, canning garden produce, making lye soap, and, in the winter, piecing the quilts that kept the family warm. She also cared for the animals, gathered eggs, plucked chickens, packaged sausage, milked cows, and churned cream for hours to make sweet, yellow butter—always smelling of the kitchen from constantly wiping her hands on her apron, leaving remnants of her work behind.

Her flower gardens, especially her prized roses, added brilliant splashes of color to the yard, fences, and ditch banks. Novice gardeners, we granddaughters brought our largest “zinnies,” “patoonies,” and “dallies” just to hear her say, “Whooooe! ‘At's a priddy un!” From her we learned to pick, pop, and can green beans (listening for the magic snap of the jar lids as they cooled on the kitchen counter). We sewed outfits and dressed our dolls (though I much preferred to dress my striped cat and push him around in the doll buggy simply because I knew he hated it so much). Other times, we helped her set, hoe, cut, or strip tobacco.

In fourth grade, under her direction, we joined 4-H and entered homemaking projects in county fair competitions: aprons, potholders, biscuits, pickles, and jams. More often than not, our projects won many awards. As females, we were encouraged to prepare for careers as secretaries, teachers, nurses, or homemakers. Those were the practical, nurturing jobs decent women took.

The whole community knew and respected Rosie. At her funeral a few years ago, the preacher cried while delivering her eulogy. There was sincere reverence in his voice as he remembered the woman even he called Mom Wilson. Still, she had known her place. No matter how pressing, all her duties were put on hold to serve

the master of the house whenever he made his appearance. Here she was submissive: she always wore dresses; she walked a few paces behind her husband in public; she never spoke aloud at church; she never ate dinner before all the working males had finished. She caused us to be always mindful of her admonitions not to bother Papa if he were in the house, watching the CBS news, reading his newspaper, or dozing in his chair. From Rosie, we learned to be a good, solid, rural homemaker.

Nevertheless, each of the girl cousins felt the pull of other forces as we grew into adulthood. The lure of the “world outside” was acknowledged in choices made. Annie, the second oldest, fell in love with and married a Baptist instead of a like-minded Church of Christ member. Her sister, Abby, was attracted to “bad boys,” and eventually married a pagan, non-farmer, school dropout. Alex, a dark-haired beauty, liked to drink occasionally and skipped school to be with her rebellious boyfriend. For a long time after she married, she chose to turn her back on her daddy’s farm and support her husband’s college education and business career. I absolutely refused to date anyone remotely connected to family farms. Yet attraction to the family farm and the force of one’s upbringing are not easily broken; every girl cousin eventually chose a “sanctioned” career (Annie became a custodian for a school, Abby a lab technician, Alex a receptionist, I a teacher) and married men who were or became full- or part-time farmers.

Resolving the disparities between “ideal” goals and the realities of rural life could be most frustrating. For example, my academic expectations and the traditional limitations of females were on a collision course. Despite his emphasis on my practical training in the arts of homemaking and farming, my dad always told me I could be anything I wanted to be. Because I was his progeny, he was obliged to brag about how smart I was. In addition, his repeated inability to sire a male offspring required contraindicants to the challenge of his masculinity. As a result, he felt constrained to elevate me in the eyes of his peers, despite my gender. Not only did he expect me to be involved in everything, he also expected me to be the best. I had no doubts about the professional path he would command for my life. The tension between my practical training and my scholarly achievements became more intense as I prepared to enter college. My aspiration was to become a lawyer, and I was thrilled when I thought my dream would be realized. The summer of my senior year, I was selected to serve as a junior leader at 4-H camp, teaching archery to younger campers. Shortly before the end of summer, I received a phone call from my debate coach informing me that I had won a full, four-year, debate scholarship to Eastern Kentucky University. The air was electric as I primed to share the news with Dad. I knew how proud he would be, how excited for me! Yet even now, years

later, I can still remember the blank look on his face as he formed his response to my declaration. Instead of rejoicing, instead of reacting with anticipated approval, my dad solemnly rejected my announcement. I would not go to school that far away from home. I was a girl; anything could happen to me! No, I would go closer to home and become a teacher! That was a nice, respectable profession that would allow me to support my husband's career as a farmer and be home with my kids in the summer and after school. Few other professions would offer that luxury.

That abrupt shift stunned me, and it took a long while to process the loss of my anticipated occupational prestige. My dream had been dashed against the rules of rural culture, for the local had met the cosmopolitan and I had lost. I knew better than to argue, so I tucked my head and calmly left camp with Dad, my fate determined. I adjusted; I became a teacher—like a good rural girl. After all, I knew my place.

Rural boys then were not expected to go to college or learn “pansy-assed” stuff. Academic pursuits were frivolous at best, meant for the rich or the lazy. However, these were horrible Vietnam War years and, because an educational deferment was rarely refused, even our male cousins were pushed toward higher education. The male cousin closest to me in age was a quirky guy born to be a comedian. In fact, his professed hero was Red Skelton and he looked a little like Red Buttons. William, who couldn't, for the life of him, keep a straight face or idea long enough to write a term paper on English Literature, was informed that he would lose his deferment if he did not get a good grade in English. So, in light of my academic strengths, I was hired by his mom, Aunt Rebecca, to be his tutor. For one whole summer we struggled: my serious, intellectual posture against his hilariously funny assessment of anything “artsie-fartsie.” He created verbal and visual cartoons of prissy male professors while we produced an acceptable paper. However, the writing was not good enough to keep him in school, and increased world threats led William to basic training at Paris Island. Aunt Rebecca always considered me the reason for his entry into the Marines, and to this day I feel guilty (“if I'd just written that damn paper!”).

Another eye-opening collision with our anti-intellectual rural culture came when I completed my doctoral work. After the disappointment of the debate scholarship and assorted other “glass ceiling” rejections along the academic byway, I had accommodated my need for scholastic fulfillment by pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. I thought I would be rewarded by my family for achieving this “ultimate” educational credential while still being a good rural girl. Following years of intensive struggle and labor pains, my chair and I birthed my doctoral

thesis. Personally ecstatic about my triumph, I invited my extended family to graduation. The night of commencement I was tingly with excitement from the thrill of finally negotiating between the local folkways and the more cosmopolitan academic world. I watched the convention hall doors expectantly throughout the grandiose proceedings. However, other than my husband and daughters, not one family member attended the ceremony; not one family member acknowledged my accomplishment in any way—not even with a card. Later I learned that my attempts at academic fulfillment were perceived as trivial or “over-the-top.” Calling me “Dr. Tucker” became a big joke. In our anti-intellectual community, advanced education had served to lower me in status.

Closely tethered to the subordinate female role in southern rural communities, Mom Wilson had never challenged her husband’s authority. Similarly, we female cousins accepted, for the most part, what this place dictated. However, now, for the first couple of years following completion of my doctorate, I withdrew into a protective shell, wounded by my family’s harsh response to my academic achievements. Slowly I balanced. I sought other, more acceptable means of cognitive expression. I taught college courses; I led professional developments; I consulted for book companies; finally, I decided to run for the county school board. Given the designated “contrarian misfit” role I had filled as a professional, my election—a lateral move from my career as a teacher to a local policy maker in the same district—represented the ultimate irony.

### **Male Rights vs. Human Rights**

My parents’ marriage had many reasons for its dysfunctionality, but I do remember a specific tremor of realization during high school when my mom told me tearfully that it had been her fault that she could give dad only girls. Mom had nearly died in childbirth—twice; one daughter was born disabled, the other was killed during birth; I was birthed by caesarian section at seven-and-a-half months. Now Mom was apologizing and accepting the fault for not giving him sons. She was the reason he could not build his empire. Mom was exceedingly bright. She knew about X and Y chromosomes and how that literally a woman did not determine gender. Nevertheless, this did not prevent her from accepting her own culpability. At the time even I reinforced Mom’s self-debasement; after all, a man could not establish an empire without the foot soldiers, and she was unable to continue the struggle to provide them.

Mom’s attitudes were reinforced by family traditions like those we practiced at mealtimes. Whenever we gathered for supper at Mom and Papa Wilson’s, the wives

brought large bowls of mashed potatoes, lima beans, corn-on-the-cob dripping with butter, fried chicken, and piles of red, ripe homegrown tomatoes. They set up two tables, one in the kitchen and one in the dining room. All the girls were required to wait in the living room until all of the working male family members had finished eating. Then the females were allowed to eat in the kitchen. We rarely had full menus; an especially tasty dish was usually emptied by the privileged Y chromosomes and frequently we had to settle for grape Kool-Aid instead of the delicious sweet tea I loved. Each year I became a little more resentful. The year I finally asked why the ladies were considered second class, Mom Wilson informed me she would have none of my “smart-mouthing.” I was crushed, for, in that insightful moment, I realized that men were kept at the pinnacle of the rural social order in part by the women who served them.

Compensation for our second class treatment, or so I believed, existed in various ways. For example, despite the agonizing sessions of sewing described earlier, spending time with my grandmother and girl cousins was a treat—one that the boy cousins missed. One summer, following my tenth birthday, however, I encountered another reality check. My mother had taken me to Mom Wilson’s to get some tomato sets (planting-sized tomato plants grown in the tobacco beds). When we arrived, I was surprised to find the boy cousins running around the yard, pretending to be cowboys and Indians. I had not been invited. Not one quilt piece or needle was in sight. The boys were not required to sew or quilt, or mend, or plant, or weed, or hoe, or cook, or can. They were encouraged to play tag, or play ball, or fish, or hunt. For some reason, until that moment I had not realized that the boys were being treated so differently. While the girls were expected to participate in practical, homemaker skill-building, the boys were given the freedom to play. It took me a while to process this information, but incident by incident I began to piece together the value puzzle.

I recalled a hot, sticky summer day when the adult brothers were hauling hay. They walked alongside a slowly moving truck, following the tractor-pulled baler. William and I had the job of driving the rusty Ford, maneuvering as close to the bales as possible. When our old vehicle neared a bale of sweet-smelling ladino clover, one of the sweaty, shirtless, sunburned men grabbed the wire binding and jerked it up onto the flatbed where a skilled stacker loaded the hay for the bumpy ride to the barn. Puffs of dried leaves wafted into the cab, covering us with dust. Because we were so small (only five or six), one of us had to stand in the seat and steer while the other sat on the gritty floor and pushed the grimy gas pedal by

hand. Clearly, one of us had the better job; William (only three weeks older) was the boy so he had dibs on steering.

My enculturation into the mores of Male Rights had firmly convinced me, from early on, that my destiny as an adult would include three things: farming, owning land, and becoming a male. I recognized, tacitly, those three values as the cornerstone of our generational agrarian dynasty. Those principles directed my life. How I would achieve maleness was not my concern at that point; Dad had told me I could do anything I wanted to and I believed him. That day in the hayfield shifted my focus: before I had strived to be the best—now I knew that, if I wanted to be the best, I had to become a boy.

By the time I was in the third grade, I was known as the strongest and, except for Tommy, the tall boy who had been held back a year, the fastest. At recess, when our games turned to “Tree Tag” (during which one side tried to force the other to tag a tree and be stuck to it for the rest of the game), I used the skills my pugilist father had taught me to evade capture. Becoming physically explosive prevented my tagging the tree even if caught by five or six boys. Eventually, I either outran or outmaneuvered them or they considered me too much trouble to capture, so they let me join their side. I became a boy—at least for a day at a time.

For the most part, I was considered one of the boys throughout elementary school. I was chosen first for team games, selected to be base man in building pyramids, and used as a body guard when playground antics got ugly. By learning to play by the rules that the boys set, I managed the balancing act that governed the life of a rural farm girl. These childhood lessons proved valuable because the agricultural community was intensely male dominated. Only men were considered mentally capable of managing complicated farm equipment. Only men were expected to be physically able enough to handle the farm animals. This recognition—that boys, not girls, were needed to drive the machinery; to pull maintenance on combines, plows, disks, and tractors; and to move the equipment from field to field—had sown the seeds of resentment in my psyche.

Another rite of passage into hoped-for maleness was the hunting trip. Hunting was a necessity, for only through the provision of small game was each family assured of meat. As the seasons allowed, men and boys gathered to hunt quail, rabbit, squirrel, and deer. Every Thanksgiving at Mom Wilson’s culminated with an announcement of who had bagged the most birds (quail), whose dog had set the prettiest point, and who had flushed the biggest covey.

Anticipating my transition to becoming male, I prepared for my virgin hunting trip when I was around seven or eight. Dad woke me up before daybreak. I dressed

in several layers: long pants and undershirt, sweater, another pair of pants, jacket, and hunting vest. The ground was covered with a blanket of fresh snow and the crisply cold morning air turned our breath into little puffs of ice crystals. Soon after we crossed the first field, the bird dogs pointed and then flushed a covey. Dad was an expert sharpshooter, and two birds fell with his first two shots. Each dog retrieved one. I remember my horror, my disillusionment, as I took the bird to place in my vest. I held the still-warm body, stroking its downy, speckled feathers, and suddenly realized that I was going to put this beautiful, delicate creature into my mouth at supper. I decided this was one aspect of being male that I could not abide. I “remembered” my poor vision and did not hunt again—ever, except for the snakes I discovered in low-hanging branches of trees.

We Wilsons are well known in the community for having a strong family bond. In April of last year my father, the godfather of the family following Papa Wilson’s death, underwent serious colon excision. By the time the blue-clad surgical technicians came to his room to escort him to surgery, all five male cousins, my three uncles, my aunt, and I were crowded into his tiny hospital room waiting to see him off. For the six weeks Dad remained in the hospital, not one day passed that at least one family member did not visit. In addition, my husband (Dad’s second in command) was assisted by all five male cousins in putting out 1,200 acres of corn and beans. When harvest came, the family again helped to bring in the crop.

One afternoon following Dad’s step down from Critical Care, my cousin Jason sat with me in the darkened hospital room. We chatted in whispers of family memories. Jason recalled proudly that “the family was always there” when any one of us had surgery. It was a sign, he said, of what a great family bond we had. I stared at him blankly as an agonizing insight seeped in. It was true: primary family members had always been there for one another—but only when the person laid up had been a male. After this latest epiphany sank in, I pointed it out to Jason. At first, he vehemently denied it. However, when I described how I had undergone serious surgery only a few months earlier and how only one cousin had been present—and only because my dad had asked him to drive for him—he was stunned. So powerfully did the male bond envelope the family value system, Jason and others could not “see” that it was gender specific, even to the point of different expectations for comfort-giving in times of serious illness. My balancing of this discrepancy includes an annual “rite of passage,” my lengthy elocution to anyone who will listen—a very small audience in this still highly patriarchal clan.

### **Family Values vs. Global Stewardship**

Wilson family beliefs are closely wound around the rural values of place; the family tends to be religiously conservative, less than tolerant of outsiders and minorities, and enmeshed in local customs. Within this matrix, the family of birth is central in assigning spots on the social scale.

It is easy for rural family values and rural religious values to become confused. Rural families, particularly in the South, often espouse strongly conservative beliefs, reflecting rigid, Evangelical Christian doctrines (Smith 2000). (They also tend to vote Republican in everything except local elections but claim to be Democrats.) The Biblical values of patriarchal control and religious traditionalism are similarly promoted by rural families at home and at school, often with an anti-intellectual slant (Hofstadter 1963). Rural values are more central to the concept of *local* than *cosmopolitan*, and religious codes of behavior are often tweaked a bit for practicality's sake. Several examples illustrate.

Obviously, the most important thing to a rural farm family is the land. "Become a steward of the earth" was a commandment that I recall from early on, and more clearly than many others. Since the time of the patron saint of farmers, St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), those who tend the soil often consider "Stewardship of Earth" (Tucker 2004) a spiritual obligation (Witte 1995). In many ways love of the land is born out in the way we care for it. However, one aspect of our farming industry has stood contra indicative to reverence for anything holy.

For as long as I can remember, our family farm has produced corn, soybeans, wheat, and beef, but the "cash crop" has been tobacco. Each spring Dad staked off the plant beds and burned them to kill all the weed seeds. Then he broadcast the tiny tobacco seeds over two or three plant beds before covering them with parachute-sized gauze strips to protect the emergent seedlings from wind and baking sun. I helped tend the beds, turning back the gauze covers to remove weeds that had escaped the fire purge. By mid-March or early April, thousands of small tobacco plants were ready to be "pulled" for planting. Mom and I removed plant after plant from the black beds—enough to fill the large buckets of the crew Dad had gathered to ride the rusty old "setting" machine. Powered by an ancient two-cylinder John Deere "popper," Dad drove back and forth across the tobacco allotment (designated acreage under the Price Support Program), while the workers fed the pinching fingers of the setting wheels. The wheels, in turn, cut a trench in the ground, carried the tender plants to the furrow, released the plants into the dirt, covered the tobacco roots, and watered them from the huge reservoir on the front of the tractor.

Tobacco crops are extremely labor-intensive. They require a tractor driver, two to five setters (depending on how many can be persuaded to labor in the blistering sun) to feed the wheel, and if available, an extra worker to walk along behind the setter, making sure that no plant is covered by dirt; otherwise, the plant dies and has to be replaced by hand. The labor-intensive crop also has to be hoed, wormed (huge, green, tobacco-spitting worms plucked from the leaves and squished between one's fingers), suckered (tiny, energy-draining offshoots removed), topped (blooms broken off), cut, spiked (shoved onto a long, pointed tobacco stick), hung (in a tall barn), sorted, and stripped (leaves taken off the stem)—all by hand—before winter sales. I still recall being covered thickly in black, sticky tobacco gum and cringing each time I popped and squished the heads off those huge, ugly, green, horned worms.

I do not remember when it slowly started to dawn on me—the linkage between smoking and cancer and death and our tobacco crop. Yet inexorably, insidiously, creep it did until finally I became convinced that St. Peter had doomed me for sure. Because of the devout Christianity my father proclaimed, I knew he could not have been aware of such connections. When I finally dared to confront him, the awakening echoed deep within me. He made it plain to me that he did know—and it did not matter. He knew—but he would still “grow cancer to sell” (my words) because it could “feed his family” (his words). This latest moral insight was far more difficult to digest than the more cerebral recognition about tobacco farming and economic gain. Every aspect of my relationship with my father was affected, for I no longer saw him as a modern St. Francis. Now he was all too human, led “astray” by the almighty dollar.

I have come to accept that in many rural farm families, rural values often become confused, in a strange oxymoronic way, with Christian values. For example, I grew up guided by commandments of hard work, long hours, asceticism, and indomitable spirit. I truly believed all these things as spiritual and Biblical—right up there with the other Ten Commandments. However, with each revelation about my tacit upbringing, I learned to be more critical and skeptical about all things claiming religious status in the rural environment.

For example, as a child, I remember being puzzled by the inconsistency between the near deification of the strong, independent, self-made man in rural society and my Sunday-School teacher's lessons about Jesus being more concerned about the weak and sickly. The value of the hallowed ground so sternly espoused by my father was not necessarily free of conflicting ideals either, as illustrated by Al Gore's campaign for president. Despite the obvious connection of Gore's political views to

stewarding the environment, and despite his strong Baptist upbringing, many rural Christians voiced disapproval of his stances on ecology, portraying him as a pagan worshiper of Mother Earth. So strongly were these beliefs embedded in the rural south, most of the rural inhabitants in my community never seriously considered voting for Gore.

As I was growing up, Dad persuaded me that his own faith—his relationship with God and the church (the only real church being the Church of Christ), his strict religious (more accurately rural) morals—was so exemplary, I never questioned the fact that he never attended church services. He worked every day—rain, shine, summer, winter, in sickness, in health. He worked from early morning light until long into the nights—at least, I thought he did. I *knew* he was a strongly religious man although I never saw him read, never saw him pick up or open a Bible. I never heard him pray, never saw him bow his head, except at the supper table in front of Mom Wilson. Nevertheless, I was certain he was chosen to be God's instrument to protect the land. God understood why he worked so much, for he claimed to "have an ox in the ditch" daily. Dad convinced me that his fervent care of the soil was in itself enough to consider his life worthy of eternal salvation. Who was I, a lowly, subservient female, to question the incongruity?

Dad's and many other rural patriarchs' brand of religion also put a high premium on loyalty, doing good deeds, and hard work. This meant that anyone, especially a nonblood-relative, not conforming to the set of rules valued by the family was labeled derogatorily. One year I overheard my dad and his brothers laughing at "Ned" (Uncle Franklin) because he had taken Aunt Ruth, Dad's sister, "to church during crop season!" Of course, he "was just lazy—everybody knew that!" He even "quit working before the sun went down most days." I contrasted what I overheard with what I knew of the tall, gentle, soft-spoken man who always smiled, took his hat off when he entered the room, never said a bad word about anyone, and quietly read his newspaper before the fire after supper. Though it did not trigger a true flash of discernment, the situation did give me pause to consider our family values in disparity to my religious beliefs.

The most heartbreaking of my rural revelations came when I was nineteen. I met a man from Indiana who was not part of the local culture. He was from a large city, rode a motorcycle, wore his jeans and T-shirt "Fonzi" style, and was not a farmer. We dated for several years, then became engaged. Because Larry was not engulfed by the hero worship of my father as others were, he saw his human side in ways that I had never admitted. One weekend shortly before our wedding, Larry dared to tell me some of what he had heard. I was overwhelmed—I could not

believe the stories. Dad may have been hard to live with at times, but he was a man of God. I was certain that my fiancé was grossly misled and I was very disappointed in him for bearing such outlandish gossip.

However, our engagement had marked the deepening relationship with my soon-to-be husband and my loyalties had begun to shift. That transition provided a distance from my father that allowed me to view him through a different lens. As I came to recognize that he was not the saint I had held him to be, I reexamined the family that I had so revered and began to accept the concept of God in more relative terms.

Joining the family church, an extended act of family bonding, was a demonstration of family values, as much as an act of faith (Peshkin 1986). The Fairview Church of Christ and its cemetery sit on a hill near the county seat on land donated by the original Wilson family to early church elders. It is still considered the “family” church. Five of the cousins, three uncles, my aunt, and my Dad continue to be members there and the cemetery is full of our ancestors.

Considered doctrinally conservative (Asa 1995), the Church of Christ is regimented in procedures and sternly male governed. For example, a person must be literally immersed into a pool of water to be “saved,” to gain eternal salvation, and to go to heaven when she or he dies. Based on the scripture that admonishes believers not to add to nor take away from the Holy Word, the members of this church have no piano in the sanctuary to accompany worship hymns: “Jesus never had a piano,” it is explained. The owner of the local IGA conducts the singing a cappella with his booming bass vibrato. (New brides sneak around the regulation by using taped instrumentals for their weddings.)

My mom, though she was a Baptist by “rebirth,” took me to visit the family church infrequently when I was a child—an unsuccessful effort to entice my dad to attend. I found a bond with my other cousins there, but my interest waned quickly, and the atmosphere became more restrictive as my inquisitive, cynical nature compelled me to challenge the rigid regulations imposed on female congregants. The Church prides itself in the fact that its procedures reflect Biblical acts performed by Jesus Christ. I learned that women are not permitted to address the congregation during services or business meetings. If my Aunt Ruth wanted to say something about cleaning the carpets or request intercessory prayer for Uncle Jim because he was having heart surgery, she nudged my Uncle Franklin and whispered in his ear. He obediently relayed the message to the rest of the church body. Because the Bible commands man to be the “head” and woman to be “submissive,” female vocal contributions are highly controlled.

Miss Madison, my church training leader, terrified when she could not answer my query about why a woman was not permitted to ask a question aloud in the presence of a man at church, directed me to the senior elder who was more interested in enforcing compliance than assisting my search for answers. Although I felt intellectually stifled and subjected to gender inequities at my family's church, over the years I have encountered similar discrimination in most of the churches in our community. No local church, of any denomination, has allowed a woman to be a pastor, only one or two might support a woman preacher, and only a very few permit female elders or deacons. Gender equality under such conservative beliefs and rituals is elusive at best. I am still searching.

As they neared adulthood, my daughters were even more frustrated by the intolerance of the family church, affected as they were by my liberal views. By the time they had families of their own, they had moved to a large college town where they could experience more cosmopolitan attitudes and escape the comparatively narrow-minded values. I, however, being bound to the family farm, the family land, the family values, and the family income (my husband "betrayed me" by joining my dad's farming business after graduating from college—"just until I can find something else"—and has been a farmer for more than 35 years now), sought other avenues for self-actualization and redemption. Ever since my dream of becoming a lawyer was dashed, I had adjusted my educational and career goals toward obtaining a doctoral degree. Only one other male family member has a college degree; no other females have anything beyond an associate's degree. I was quite aware of the extent that my competitive nature and thirst for intellectual expression stood in direct opposition to expectations of women in our rural culture. Still, the journey toward the Ph.D. provided multiple academic opportunities and outlets; I met new people, made new friends, traveled to the big city (Louisville), and was exposed to new concepts, religions, and value systems. However, I still needed to maintain some local social contacts to function within the structure of the family farm. Because rural communities have little to offer culturally except through the church, I was forced to plant one foot in the cosmopolitan world of a major university while the other was firmly rooted in local networks—church and primary family.

This was not an easy compromise. As the tensions between local family values and my growing interest in the outside world intensified, I found myself moving increasingly toward the more cosmopolitan attitudes of my coiled value spring. While my education challenged me to adopt more tolerant attitudes and global concerns, I found it more difficult to rationalize the discrepant values of my birth

family, which I had come to perceive as representing loyalty to ethnic purity, misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and pseudo-Christian values. Over the years, my opinions on just about everything have altered due to my aha! moments, moving ever farther from the center of that tightly wound spring. For me now, church attendance is more a choice than a chore; a person's value depends little on his/her family of origin; I am satisfied more by intellectual wisdom than by display of practical skills; I believe that God speaks many languages; I think that God may be black or feminine; and I know that to think of earth as the only home for intelligent beings severely limits an omniscient God.

Fortunately, my relationship with my father has continued to evolve, taking a more conciliatory direction. Following Mom's death two years ago, Dad suffered a stroke and has been forced into a nursing home. He is no longer the iron-fisted godfather who made me believe he could read my mind. He is now an old man totally dependent on the services of others and the kindness of strangers. Faced with twisting issues of religious judgment, painful memories, deep resentments, forgiveness, and acceptance, I have been required to remove myself physically and ideologically from the traditional, subservient role as his offspring. I am now his caretaker. To see to his survival, I must rebalance continually. Ironically, I have been forced to address the very demons that consumed Bobby Lee.

### **Postscript**

My thoughts snapped back to the handsome man lying in the casket near the front of the room. Bobby Lee had left home for college, had been influenced by the larger world, had rejected his rural heritage, and had been unable to balance and readjust for values he had outgrown. He was separated from his fourth wife to whom he had been unfaithful; he had disowned his only child because she had married a man of another race; he had refused to meet his only grandchild because she was biracial; he had become hopelessly addicted to methamphetamines; he had returned home to be cared for by his aging parents; and he had died in his childhood bathroom at the age of 51 although he was in line to inherit the large family farm from which, for most of his life, he had tried to run away. Bobby Lee was an example of rural values gone awry. He died as evidence to the enormous effect "place" has on individuals who strive to survive by maintaining strict allegiance to local norms and mores, even as cosmopolitan values drive the world around them.

I left the funeral home that night understanding that especially for those steeped in rural culture, how we balance conflicting and shifting values—maintaining fidelity to fundamental rural values of God, family, place, land, loyalty, and tradition

yet understanding the inequities of “old boy” gender bias and the hypocrisies inherent in tobacco production and selected religious practices—may depend on our developing better “adjustment” strategies. First, we need to recognize the lessons of the aha! moments that come our way. Second, we need to accommodate the best of our local values with the inevitable march of cosmopolitanism. Third, given the reach of modern communication and transportation, including multiple media outlets and the internet with its global resources, we need to accept the reality that even rural areas are no longer isolated. Finally, we need to recognize that the stark choice between either “local” or “cosmopolitan” is no longer viable.

I also left the funeral home that night with a greater appreciation of the broad base that my advanced education has given me, a deeper respect for the distance and tolerance that it has provided me, and a keen insight into the adjustment strategies (Schwarzweiler and Brown 1967) that I had adapted. My education has provoked myriad experiences with tensions, moments of recognition, and rebalancings: a repository of cultural wisdom with which to face the traumatic, stormy challenges of advancing years. When my private, primary reality has fallen apart and the foundation at the core of my value system has been questioned, I have shifted toward the other end of the values continuum, another reality to hold me firm—anchoring my moral compass in the values of both milieus. With an increased appreciation for the differing strengths inherent in both worlds, I can respond to unexpected events by shifting back and forth between the domains. This fluid gyration, this “ruralibrium” dance, juxtaposed between the stable, solid, careful nature of rural culture and the dynamic, loose, chaotic, carefree nature of cosmopolitan culture, is a socially embedded resolution of the “goods” in both cultures and the concomitant dilemmas that imposes upon us (Miller 1991).

I had mastered the ruralibrium dance. Bobby Lee never fully learned the fluid Local/Cosmopolitan movements. He never learned to avoid straying too far, staying too long on one end of the values continuum. He did not know how to use these opposing values to keep his moral compass from gyrating out of control. “Ruralibrium,” the tango born of my duplicitous natures, the true reward of my educational journey, has allowed me to come home—safely.

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