



Indiana Humanities Council

Think. Read. Talk.

TO BE A NATIVE MIDDLE-WESTERNER

By Kurt Vonnegut

"Breathes there the man, with soul so dead, who never to himself has said, this is my own, my native land." This famous celebration of no-brainer patriotism by the Scotsman Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), when stripped of jingoistic romance, amounts only to this: Human beings come into this world, for their own good, as instinctively territorial as timber wolves or honeybees. Not long ago, human beings who strayed too far from their birthplace and relatives, like all other animals, would be committing suicide.



This dread of crossing well-understood geographical boundaries still makes sense in many parts of the world – in what used to be Yugoslavia in Europe, for example, or Rwanda in Africa. It is, however, now excess instinctual baggage in most of North America, thank God, thank God. It lives on in this country, as obsolescent survival instincts often do, as feelings and manners which are by-and-large harmless, which can even be comical.

Thus do I and millions like me tell strangers that we are Middle Westerners, as though we deserved some kind of a medal for being that. All I can say in our defense is that natives of Texas and Brooklyn are even more preposterous in their territorial vanity.

Nearly countless movies about Texans and Brooklynites are lessons for such people in how to behave ever more stereotypically. Why have there been no movies about supposedly typical Middle Western heroes, models to which we too might conform?

All I've got now is an aggressively nasal accent.

About that accent: When I was in the Army during World War II, a white Southerner said to me, "Do you have to talk that way?"

I might have replied, "Oh yeah? At least my ancestors never owned slaves," but the rifle range at Fort Bragg, N.C., seemed neither the time nor the place to settle his hash.

I might have added that some of the greatest words ever spoken in American history were uttered with just such a Jew's-harp twang, including the Gettysburg address by Abraham Lincoln of Illinois and these by Eugene V. Debs of Terre Haute, Ind.: "As long as there is a lower class I am in it, as long as there is a criminal element I am of it, as long as there is a soul in prison I am not free."

I would have kept to myself that the borders of Indiana, when I was a boy, cradled not only the birthplace of Eugene V. Debs, but the national headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan.

Illinois had Carl Sandburg and Al Capone.

Yes, and the thing on top of the house to keep the weather out is the ruff, and the stream in back of the house is the crick.

Every race, sub-race and blend thereof is native to the Middle West. I myself am a purebred Kraut. Our accents are by no means uniform. My twang is only fairly typical of European-Americans raised some distance north of the former Confederate States of America. It appeared to me when I began this essay that I was on a fool's errand, that we could only be described en masse as what we weren't. We weren't Texans or Brooklynites or Californians or Southerners, and so on.

To demonstrate to myself the folly of distinguishing us, one-by-one, from Americans born anywhere else, I imagined a crowd on Fifth Avenue, in New York City where I am living now, and another crowd on State Street, in Chicago where I went to a university and worked as a reporter half a century ago. I was not mistaken about the sameness of the faces and clothing and apparent moods.

But the more I pondered the people of Chicago, the more aware I became of an enormous presence there. It was almost like music, music unheard in New York or Boston or San Francisco or New Orleans.

It was Lake Michigan, an ocean of pure water, the most precious substance in all this world.

Nowhere else in the Northern Hemisphere are there tremendous bodies of pure water like our Great Lakes, save for Asia, where there is only Lake Baikal. So there is something distinctive about all native Middle Westerners after all. Get this: When we were born, there had to have been incredible quantities of fresh water all around us, in lakes and streams and rivers and raindrops and snowdrift, and no undrinkable salt water anywhere!

Even my taste buds are Middle Western on that account. When I swim in the Atlantic or Pacific, the water tastes all wrong to me, even though it is in fact no more nauseating, as long as you don't swallow it, than chicken soup.

There were also millions and millions of acres of topsoil all around us and our mothers when we were born, as flat as pool tables and as rich as chocolate cake.

When I was born in 1922, barely a hundred years after Indiana became the 19th state in the Union, the Middle West already boasted a constellation of cities with symphony orchestras and museums and libraries, and institutions of higher learning, and schools of music and art, reminiscent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War. One could almost say that Chicago was our Vienna, Indianapolis our Prague, Cincinnati our Budapest and Cleveland our Bucharest.

To grow up in such a city, as I did, was to find cultural institutions as ordinary as police stations or fire houses. So it was reasonable for a young person to daydream of becoming some sort of artist or intellectual, if not a policeman or fireman. So I did. So did many like me.

Such provincial capitals, which is what they would have been called in Europe, were charmingly self-sufficient with respect to the fine arts. We sometimes had the director of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra to supper, or writers and painters, and architects like my father, of local renown.

I studied clarinet under the first chair clarinetist of our orchestra. I remember the orchestra's performance of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, in which the cannons' roars were supplied by a policeman firing blank cartridges into an empty garbage can. I knew the policeman. He sometimes guarded street crossings used by students on their way to or from School 43, my school, the James Whitcomb Riley School.

It is unsurprising, then, that the Middle West has produced so many artists of such different sorts, from world-class to merely competent, as provincial cities and towns in Europe used to do.

I see no reason this satisfactory state of affairs should not go on and on, unless funding for instruction in and celebration of the arts, especially in public school systems, is withdrawn.

Participation in an art is not simply one of many possible ways to make a living as we approach the year 2000. Participation in an art, at bottom, has nothing to do with earning money. Participation in an art, although unrewarded by wealth or fame, and as the Middle West has encouraged so many of its young to discover for themselves, is a way to make one's soul grow.

No artist from anywhere, however, not even Shakespeare, not even Beethoven, not even James Whitcomb Riley, has changed the course of so many lives all over the planet as have four hayseeds in Ohio -- two in Dayton and two in Akron. How I wish Dayton and Akron were in Indiana! Ohio could have Kokomo and Gary.

Orville and Wilbur Wright were in Dayton in 1903 when they invented the airplane.

Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith and William Griffith Wilson were in Akron in 1935 when they devised the 12 steps to sobriety of Alcoholics Anonymous. By comparison with Smith and Wilson, Sigmund Freud was a piker when it came to healing dysfunctional minds and lives.

Beat that! Let the rest of the world put that in their pipes and smoke it, not to mention the works of Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow and Toni Morrison; Cole Porter and Hoagy Carmichael; Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan; Twyla Tharp and Bob Fosse; Mike Nichols and Elaine May.

And Larry Bird!

New York and Boston and other ports on the Atlantic have Europe for an influential, often importunate neighbor. Middle Westerners do not. Many of us of European ancestry are on that account ignorant of our families' past in the Old World and the culture there. Our only heritage is American. When Germans captured me during the Second World War, one asked me, "Why are you making war against your brothers?" I didn't have a clue what he was talking about...

Anglo-Americans and African-Americans, whose ancestors came to the Middle West from the South, commonly have a much more compelling awareness of a homeland elsewhere in the past than do I – in Dixie, of course, not the British Isles or Africa.

What geography can give all Middle Westerners, along with the fresh water and topsoil, if they let it, is awe for an Edenic continent stretching forever in all directions.

Makes you religious. Takes your breath away.

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