

Understanding Rural America:

I was raised in a small town called Grassy Butte in Western North Dakota. In my town, everyone either worked in the oil fields, or raised cattle. Grassy Butte, when I was growing up, was home to about 100 people. My elementary school had 24 kids total and that was kindergarten through sixth grade. As soon as we hit 7th grade we got on buses at 6:30 in the morning to go 30 miles to the closest high school, to the big town of Watford City, North Dakota. Population at the time, 1700. And any time that we wanted to go anywhere, it involved a big trip. We drove 60 miles to get groceries. We never just ran to the store for something. Going to town was always a whole-day long trip that included errands, groceries, appointments, and of course, getting gas.

We were completely isolated from the rest of the world.

Forget New York City and Los Angeles. To us, Fargo was an exotic Locale filled with lots of snooty sugar beet Farmers and other weird people who mysteriously ruled the state. I grew up listening to my parents talk about Rush Limbaugh and rant about how feminazis and tree-huggers were ruining the world for all of us. I remember watching the LA riots on television and hearing people say look at those people out there. They have no respect for anything. They're like a bunch of animals. And I bet they're all living off the government.

Meanwhile, out in the boonies of Western North Dakota, everyone was so smug. We didn't have these problems of civil unrest, we were all wholesome, salt-of-the-earth, tax-paying, God-fearing, church-attending people. We weren't a bunch of City Slickers that were so removed from the rest of the world they didn't even know where their food came from. We were from small town America, so we had common sense and resourcefulness. Sure, we might be a little redneck, after all, we all lived in trailers and drove more or less the dilapidated vehicles, but we never failed to help a neighbor, as long as he was the same as us.

And frankly it wasn't hard to find somebody who was the same as us. Everyone in our community was poor, uneducated, and white. While we prided ourselves on our self-discipline, common sense, and family values, we had one of the highest rates of alcoholism in the country. I mean why not? Our town had nothing but a gas station and a bar. The gas station closed at 6, so all socialization occurred at the bar. I grew up hanging out at the bar and digging through sawdust on the floor for spare change. My mom would bartend on some nights, and every Sunday after church my mom, sister, and I would clean the bar for a little bit of extra cash. This cash almost always went to pay the bar bill at the end of the month. Despite our pretty much perpetual state of poverty, I still remember hearing my mom complain that my dad had managed to rack up \$150 bar tab. In the mid-80s, when a beer cost \$1. And yes, for those of you wondering, everyone did have a monthly bar bill, just the same way as you would have a monthly electricity bill.

Of course, pretty much all of the bar's patrons insisted that they didn't have a problem with alcohol. They weren't like "so-and-so" Trotter who passed out at the bar every night. They were just social drinkers. None the less, pretty much all the kids in town knew the bar's phone number before they knew their own home phone number. I mean, you've got to call Dad to tell him supper's ready.

Along with alcoholism came other debilitating secrets. Domestic violence was commonplace. Of course, we all knew the families that had the big problems, where the dad got drunk and the mom ended up in the hospital. But no one was really surprised by those folks, most of them were raised by abusive fathers, so they were just continuing the "family tradition". But there were many others, who's abuse was less public. Of course, it was always frowned upon, but in everybody's mind what happened between a man and his wife was Nobody's Business.

Besides, nobody believed in shrinks, mental illness, or any of that other touchy-feely stuff. There were lots of things we didn't discuss.

Consider our history. When the oil boom of the 1980s went bust, families found themselves pushed to the limits. There's no doubt that the poverty, isolation, and a collapsing local economy was devastating to the community, but nobody was going to admit that they were personally hurting. Even as half the town moved away in search of work, the residence of Grassy Butte just hunkered down and insisted that things would be fine if everybody just pulled themselves up by the bootstraps. Somehow, no matter how bad it got, it seemed like there was always another family that was worse off.

In a way, all of this made us a better community. Even though we continued to have absolutely no care for the "outsider", we took care of each other pretty well. Anytime that someone got really sick, you could guarantee that there would be meals delivered, babies cared for, and a benefit held for medical expenses at our community hall. We had good times too. Weddings and baby showers were serious celebrations. No one ever bothered to send out invitations, they just hung a homemade sign in the post office and relied on word-of-mouth. Everyone was always invited, and everybody helped out. For big events, we would even block off our one road for a street dance.

I was one of the only kids in my generation from Grassy Butte to go to college - most all of the boys had been lured away by big trucks, beer, and ranching. And even though most of the citizens of Grassy Butte viewed a college education as something both frivolous and suspicious, they gave me so much money when I graduated from high school that I was able to pay for my first year of college. They were proud of me.

In college, everything changed. For me. I was exposed to new people and new ideas. I learned to look at the world in a very different way. Suddenly, I could see the flaws in their reasoning. Their isolationist attitude of "us versus the world" seemed all wrong.

The more I learned of the world, the more I realized how isolated and different my "small town America" was. The world wasn't at all like they had portrayed it. I started to avoid going home to visit. I only made polite conversation when my dad called. I didn't know what to say to these people. They were so small-minded and racist and sexist that I didn't even know where to start. Worst of all, they had no idea. Of course, they knew that racism was bad. But to them, you weren't really a racist unless you are a member of the KKK. Now those guys were racist. Making jokes about Native Americans though was just all in good humor. You shouldn't be so serious.

The crazy part was that while they were being so nasty to everybody that was different from them, they were convinced that they were actually the ones under attack. They were completely saturated with fear. They were all sure that their white kids would never get into college because of affirmative action. Their hard-earned taxpayer dollars were going to fund a Road to Nowhere somewhere in

California. Gay marriage was somehow a threat to their own marriage. All the jobs were going to Mexico and China. And any second they were going to be blown up by an Muslim terrorist. They had listened to too much talk radio, and somehow convinced themselves that the world was falling apart and they were the only decent people left. And because they were so isolated, they simply didn't know any better.

I don't know how to fix this problem. This divide between rural and urban America has been getting worse and it has had a profound influence on my family. I find myself angry and frustrated with the community that helped raise me. Part of me wants to just end the relationship and move on. I mean how can I be friends with someone who says those sorts of things. But then I remember what Jesus said about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. And I take a deep breath. Maybe it won't be today, or even tomorrow, but little by little we will whittle them down with kindness and generosity, and they'll discover the outside world and how awesome it actually is. And someday they will love everyone, even those who are different.