

Meditation on "Culture"
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St. Louis lies at a crossroads of American culture.

- Some people call it the southernmost Northern city, or the northernmost Southern city.
- St. Louis often characterizes itself as the westernmost Eastern city.
- No one thinks of St. Louis as a Western city. It is not one. All the horses are fitted with English saddles, which tells you all you need to know.
- But the city and the whole Diocese of Missouri suit me. I grew up in West Texas, in a displaced Southern culture, my grandparents and great-grandparents having migrated to Texas from Mississippi and Alabama.
- Because of God's sense of humor, I have spent most of my adult life in the upper Midwest, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa.
- Near the convergence of the Missouri and Mississippi River is where Midwest meets South. That's where I live.

And of course it is not that simple, the place where Midwest meets South. There are, for example, two pronunciations for the state that I call home: Missouri and Missouri-ah.

- I thought that these were mere affectations—until the season of Ferguson began last summer.
- When I learned that Missouri is how to say the word in locales where the Union prevailed in the Civil War.
- Missour-ah is the pronunciation in places where the Confederacy predominated. The correspondence is far from perfect, but it is still interesting and helpful.
- Confederacy/Union was just a matter of North and South in our state; it was more of a patchwork. To be sure, anything South of St. Louis is likely to be more Southern in culture.
- But there were large pockets of Confederate sympathy elsewhere—one, for example, north of St. Louis, in the counties around Hannibal, and another in a large swath of Mid-Missouri, a region still called Little Dixie.
- These variants are relics of a bitter season in the state, and a season that had everything to do with slavery.
- The succeeding cultures in their variants are relics of that bitter season also. Missouri is a deeply divided state. And it embarrasses me to say that it remains largely segregated, and racism remains real and toxic for everyone.

You will notice that although I am a child of the South, I cannot bring myself to say Missouri-ah.//

My upbringing was in a farming community in West Texas, in a cluster of small towns south of Abilene.

- That place was all about farming and ranching and oil.
- Our religion was evangelical, with Southern Baptist as the default. Or maybe it was the Church of Christ. Or maybe it was the Methodists. But that's all. There were no others. We were zoned for these three and no more.
- Our politics were populist, which could turn *generous* or *mean* in equal portions.
- Agriculture was everything. Two classmates in my graduating class of twenty-three were American Junior Rodeo Association champions.
- It will require little imagination on your part to understand that I. Did. Not. Fit. In.
- I was a bookish and curious child, craving something else but I knew not what. And I played the oboe, for goodness sake.
- South Taylor County Texas was no place for the likes of me.

And paradoxically it is the place that roots me. It's home. I have vestiges of the accent. Fields of bluebonnets in the springtime will leave me wistful. Red clay dirt is what I am made of. The folk cookery there is my comfort food.

- The people there in Texas were the ones to teach me the gospel, and to love it. The old women who were my Sunday-School teachers gave me the first inkling that I had a vocation; they told me that God was already calling me, and I believed them.
- The generous side of populist politics is still what I claim.
- I am as Texas as a pecan tree, as Texas as the Colorado River, as Wolf Brand Chili and Mrs. Baird's Bread and Shiner Beer.
- I cannot get over Bob Wills and Texas Swing. I love that subversive lyric of his that comes out of nowhere in one of his songs:
*Little bee picks the pollen, big bee gets the honey.
Little man picks the cotton, big man gets the money.*
Populism asserts itself in a song. These are my people.
- And still, that place that I call home was—is—no place for the likes of me.

On my best days, I can befriend this signal contradiction in my life and learn from it: I have been able to say about various places: **this** is my home, and: I can *never* be at home here.

- This sensibility has taught me the incarnational grace of having a place be from, and settling into that place

insofar as possible. Learning such a thing has not always been easy.

- And at the same time, the contradiction and my not-belonging have taught me to be dissatisfied with things as they are, and to sing Beulah Land: I'm kind of homesick for a country to which I've never been before./

I have settled into life as a Missourian. The great rivers are awe-inspiring, and I love them. I saw an eagle as I crossed the Missouri River just last Sunday. Ozark Mountains and Mississippi Delta. Cotton, the crop that my father raised, grows in Missouri.

- Trout streams and prairies, the largest limestone karst formation in the world. The Arch. The Cardinals.
- I think that the Western tradition would have a bishop to go native in his or her Diocese. Hence the custom, usually abandoned in the Episcopal Church, of a bishop taking as a surname the name of the Diocese. George Wayne Missouri has a certain ring to it.
- There is something right about that custom. A bishop and diocese must belong together, and adopt one another.
- I unashamedly love my diocese and its people. There is not another Diocese whom I would want to serve.
- I think that I have gone native. My upbringing shaped me for such capacity.
- But of course there must be the paradox that has followed me all my life. Missouri is no place for the likes of me.
 - The politics make me want to scream.
 - St. Louis City and County are balkanized to within an inch of their lives, with 118 separate political units altogether.
 - St. Louis has effectively built a structure to stifle any quest for the common good, and the segmentation provides a handy gridwork for the third most segregated urban area in the country.
 - Ferguson, one of 90 cities in St. Louis County, was a so-called “sundown town” through the 1950s. That is, by custom if not by force, people of African descent had to leave the city limits before sundown. Or else.
 - The Department of Justice’s report last week documents how this same sensibility has been preserved by other means.
 - The history and the report are both the truth, and an embarrassment.
 - Racism is rooted 250 years deep in our history, and it is caustic.
 - The dominant culture denies that there is any such thing as privilege.

- The state is armed to the teeth, practices capital punishment, and is perfectly American in its ease with anti-intellectualism.
- Missouri is no place for the likes of me.
- I love this place, and I do not belong here.
- God seems to have prepared me for such a life from the beginning. I have learned from Philippians 4 that ultimately, my citizenship lies elsewhere. My citizenship is in heaven, Paul writes, and it is from there that we can expect a Savior—the Lord Jesus Christ.
- I am a stranger and alien everywhere I go. And that’s just fine. I can also learn to call it home.

Flannery O’Connor appeals to my own sensibilities of the bizarre and about the South.

- She uses the bizarre and overstated to convey the grace of God.
- Anyone who can do that gets my admiration.
- When I was first ordained, nay even a boy priest, I drew on Miss Flannery for sermon illustrations more than I should have.
- My wife Debra Morris Smith, who is an English Literature PhD, eventually had to tell me that I could not cite Flannery ever again. I had used up my quota.
- Well, it’s been more than 30 years, and my wife is not here.

So here’s the closing section of Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation.”

- Just to remind you of the narrative, the story is about Ruby Turpin, a mean-spirited and for no obvious reason self-important woman from some place in the South.
- No, that’s not quite it. She has her own sense of social order and respectability in which her particular kind of white people have a good place. Maybe the best place.
- In the last scene of the story, Ruby Turpin, standing in a hog parlor, falls down. And she sees a vision horrific at first but then it turns more hopeful. But it is a searing vision. Understand that I am telescoping a lot detail here. Here is the last part of what she sees:

At last Ruby Turpin lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading like an extension of the highway into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending

upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black people in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They, alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away.

- Even their virtues were being burned away. Or was it their entitlement? Or respectability? Or place of honor? Self-regard? Identity? Being better-than?
- Of course Miss Flannery, good Catholic, is writing about the purgation of souls: but any of us with any sense of what God requires from us will realize that for our salvation, a lot of things are going to have to burn away.
- I believe in my heart that privilege will have to go. For goodness sake, a lot of us of European descent would rather give up our virtue than our privilege.
- In the age to come, and for the sake of Christ who is saving us, it has to burn away.