

An Agrarian Tradition

Brian Lowry

In my preteen years of the 1960s, perhaps the place I loved most to visit was my Uncle Lowell and Aunt Hazel Lowry's farm. A pond, thick with bluegill and catfish, was but a short distance from their house. We would saunter down a gentle slope and cross over a white footbridge to reach the pond. That little bridge lingers in my mind as a passageway to a magical place. Each step closer increased the pleasure I felt inside and the keenness of the coming few hours in the country. Every visit to their farm set me free from unwelcome noises and a pace I didn't care for in town. From my earliest memories I recall what I would now describe as an innate longing toward nature, toward the given earth. It may well have been the sight of Uncle Lowell's cattle grazing nearby while we fished, the crickets chirping by the pond, the woods close at hand or the joy of the day's catch that confirmed that I belonged to such a place. In my simplest childhood fantasies, I was drawn to imagine all my life being played out on such a farm.

Throughout my grade school and junior high school years I would return there often with my dad, sometimes with other siblings. I have not forgotten the occasion when Dad stood talking with Uncle Lowell out near the barn. I was, at first, impatient with their talk, but then I heard a scraping noise coming from a white oak and a syncopated rhythm like rain showering the barn roof. My impatience was completely allayed by the sight of an old gray squirrel turning an acorn in its paws and tumbling shards to the tin roof. I became aware not only of the squirrel, but also the rough bark of the tree trunk, the light, the shadows, the morning mist filtering through the canopy, and most especially the slanting sunrays that drew lines from heaven to the spot where, in admiration, I stood.

All these years later, memory's images bring that morning back sharper than any digital camera, crisper than a master's painting. Now, I wonder what Dad and Uncle Lowell talked about for so long while I allowed nature to watch over me. It was

summer, and the calves were fattening out in the pasture, so I suspect their talk centered on livestock, but I'll never know the mystery of their conversation. I was aware then, as I am aware now, that I had experienced the privileges of being often in the company of adults I admired and of hearing their talk. Given that my parents were well into their 40s when I was born, most of the adults who shaped my character would have been well into middle age by the time I reached adolescence. I know now that this was an immense blessing.

By the time I reached my high school years, I knew that being the son of parents much older than the parents of my neighborhood friends set my thinking and my experience apart. When I thought about girls and dating, I doubted that anyone could be found who would understand life from the perspectives I had been trained. No other kids I knew had parents who married at the height of the Great Depression. Many of my friends' parents married well after World War II had ended. My parents held a local, rural, self-sufficient view of life. My friends' parents came into maturity at a time when industry was redefining work, transportation, recreation and home. I knew the difference, even then, and I deeply doubted that a girlfriend could be found who appreciated and respected a life drawn from the countryside. This was especially so given that the few farm boys I knew particularly well each aspired to leave their farms, go to college and then travel off to a distant career in a place that even their imaginations couldn't define. Their minds had been made up by television ads, magazine articles,

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But, much to my surprise, I met a girl at church who did not think like the rest. I remember, along with her excellent smile and gracious countenance, that I was enormously impressed by the fact that she knew how to sew. How or why that came up in our early conversations I have forgotten. I simply knew that here was a person given to do her own work in her own home. I was soon to discover that she shared my affection for art and music. That she loved to cook, that she played piano, that she tended roses and other perennial plants captivated me. Before long I was more in love than I knew how to be.

The first time she invited me to her home was at once encouraging and frightening. A friend had said to me, “You had better be careful dating that farmer’s daughter. He’ll have his double barrel in his lap when you get there!” Though I doubted that story, I didn’t doubt that he might not be too interested in a bony town boy courting his daughter. So, the thought of him waiting on the porch with his L. C. Smith shotgun didn’t completely escape my mind. Instead, on my first arrival there with Melinda, he was not to be found within immediate sight.

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Melinda introduced me to her mother, Elsie, who seemed to me from the start what I knew her later by experience to be, an intelligent, articulate, completely capable woman.

Melinda asked where her daddy was. I could feel my heart rate increase. Elsie told us that he was in the back pasture putting up new fence. We walked then, through the orchard, by the vegetable garden until we reached the fencing closest to the house. Melinda climbed over, as surely she had innumerable times on her way to greet her daddy. I followed. Out in the distance, well across the pasture, I saw for the first time this man, a man I knew to be around 65 years old. I had thus supposed he would be reduced by age limitations. However, as we drew closer, my supposed knowledge was disciplined by the sight of an aging man who was thrusting a post hole digger far down into an opening in the earth that he had made with a spade. His arms pulled the V-shaped handles up to his chest. The head of the digger

was clasped tightly around a heavy mass of clay soil. I knew as I saw the strength in his chest, shoulders and arms that he would never be in need of a gun if he chose to run me off. He could easily squeeze me and haul me out like that clay.

Melinda introduced me to her daddy, Glen. His handshake told a story I needed to listen to. And I did, with admiration, humility and gratitude. It came to me then that while I was concerned about what he might think of me, he was concerned about his work. He had a job to do that he wanted to do, and he wasn't waiting for me to get it done. That straightforward fact has stayed with me as a marker and a teacher. Soon I would take up the spade and help him dig, then set the cedar posts in place.

That was 34 years ago. The cedar posts still stand, though Glen and Elsie have gone on. Over the 18 years I was blessed to know them, it is fair to say that I owe them far more than I can enumerate. I learned, first hand, the possibilities of a rural home place, the meaning of neighborliness, the value of fulfilling work, the experience of faith, the limits of human intelligence, the cooperation necessary to work within and be part of the creation. And, most importantly, I learned that I loved their daughter because she was, and still is, a soul nurtured by their best qualities, deepest trusts and abiding faiths.

For 21 years Melinda and I, and now with the companionship of our daughter, have made our home in this place. On the same ground her parents worked, we enrich the soil, we plant and we cultivate. We witness the continuing miracle of growth, death and decay that keep the earth fertile. And we know we are gathered in a circle that includes the dead and the living, a circle that contains our knowledge and our limits, a circle wherein we bow to our parents and then join hands with our daughter to carry on the sustaining work of the farm. Because of what we have been given and what we give in return, this work impels us to be responsible caretakers of a heritage that is established in the ground and thereby sets our feet always toward the making of a better home here on earth, where the rewards were pre-established by God's work in creation and made available to any willing to carry on the sustaining work of a servant steward.

Brian Lowry, teacher, farmer, and naturalist, writes from Meadow Glen Farm near Leota, Indiana. His wife, daughter and he devote much time to their sustainable farm where they grow vegetables, fruits, herbs, perennial flowers, native plants and care for a variety of livestock.