

# The Wholeness of Teaching: Moments of Survival

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Stage Manager: *So, friends, this is the way we were in our growing up and in our marrying and in our doctoring and in our living and in our dying.*

—Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*

Everyone wears jeans, the standard uniform at these small town car shows. Tee shirts and jeans. Barbecued ribs and chicken are served under a tent around back of the converted A & W. The bulk of the crowd still goes to the main window in front with the long counter top and wooden bar stools, same as on an ordinary night, and orders from the regular menu: corn dogs, chili dogs, burgers, and the big fries this place is famous for. Hungry as we are, even this greasy food smells extraordinary. Looking in the take-out window, I see the tip of the chef's white hat over the grill, teenage girls busy making thick milk shakes and deep frying onion rings and fries, and bottles of vinegar and big shakers of salt on the counter.

While I'm waiting for our order to be called, I look at the cars in the show. Corvettes are pulled over to one side together, but everything else is lined up haphazardly: you might have a '38 Ford truck next to a little '68 muscle-car Camaro. Some vehicles are still in original condition; some are souped up with 4-barrel carbs and through-the-hood air intakes.

While looking across the rows of spotless engines, I wave to a boy I recognize from school. He had been my student briefly in seventh grade during a ten-week writing class, but he was uninterested in written expression, and we had several conflicts during class. But now he waves back to me. His older sister eyeballs him and gives him an elbow into the side. "You don't talk to teachers, idiot."

She smiles over to me because I am watching, but I think she meant it just the same. Most of the girls working behind the counter in the A & W have been in my classes.

By the time our take-out is cooked and our number called, we have looked at all the Fords and Chevies parked in lines across the small parking lot and lawn. I sit at the only available picnic table back behind most of the fifty or so cars in a shady corner, where I spot a few teachers from my school. I'm not all that anxious to say hello to them. Not because I don't like them. I just want to be away, be with my family, instead of my job, and sometimes I want to be in a place where I don't know anyone. Hard to do in a small town. Every Monday morning at school is tense because everybody finds out everything that happened to everybody else during the weekend. Nothing escapes the gossip mill in the school halls. Guidance has a busy day on Mondays sorting out who is feuding with whom.

This town—let's just call it "Grover's Corners," the setting of Thornton Wilder's classic American drama *Our Town*—is representative in many ways of all small towns. It has a population of 4,733; if I called the local hospital, I might have to adjust that number by one or two. The one movie theater is now divided into three. Both supermarkets are super-sized, so big that folks complain of getting lost inside. Grover's Corners has two auto parts stores, three hardware and building supply stores, two restaurants with bars inside, and more video places than I ever thought necessary or possible. A few gas stations, beauty salons and mom-and-pop stores dot the town's edges. No place for ballet or opera or even a circus to come to. People leave for those events.

The old part of downtown is compact, just a T-shaped intersection of two streets with an architectural conglomeration of century-old buildings and newer ones lining the main

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Moira Donovan in her classroom at Peoples Academy



## The Wholeness of Teaching...

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street. In a book at our school library I have seen historic photos of this place, congested with horses and wagons and women in long prairie skirts crossing the mud underneath new gas lights on the main street. So there is a past here, a past when trains arrived to load our New England lumber and carry it away to the cities, a past when only the hardy ventured north. Some of these buildings are empty now, a string of failed businesses whose dusty, paint-chipped signs advertise their vacancy. Other businesses have survived the changes, and these employ local people, including my tenth graders, who need jobs to pay for their cars and car insurance. Kids drive at sixteen. Seems young, but they feel the urge to get out, to move away, to get beyond this place, this time, this town.

Like the photos in the library, the school buildings themselves tell a history. The official education of Grover's Corners' children started in 1899 with one building, which still houses the kindergarten, although teachers worry it might fall down around them. The oldest part of the high school was built early in this century and stands tall. The main structure was built by a man who, although born in Grover's Corners, sought his fortune elsewhere and returned with a young bride in hopes of building a spectacular home high on the hill overlooking the town. She died before his vision could be realized. So plans changed: a grand school was erected instead, paid for and given as a gift to Grover's Corners. It became the central school for a few neighboring towns and opened its doors in 1927.

The building is a beautiful, tall, two-story structure, 60 feet by

145 feet, constructed of tapestry brick with granite trimming. Pillars of Indiana limestone stand like giant sentinels on either side of the entrance. On the first floor is an auditorium capable of seating 450, with study and recitation room; on the second floor are the laboratories, drafting room, commercial rooms, and sewing room; in the basement are the kitchen, cafeteria, manual training department, locker rooms, and a gymnasium.

Wings were added to the main structure in the 1950's and now need renovation. But the town voted down the bond proposal that would have fixed the place up. Most of my students were excited about the prospects of a new gym. I speak to them about the importance of voting, about the fact that the bond issue was decided by only a fraction of the town's residents. Had more people voted, I

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tell them, they might be bouncing basketballs in a new gym. They seem to understand that they are the losers in such local politics, but they don't experience the same involvement when I discuss presidential elections. I am frustrated by teen apathy, especially because when it comes to allowing smoking or wearing hats in school they are enthusiastic policy advocates.

During the car show, the owner of the hamburger joint, the organizer of this yearly event, pulls a twenty-something woman out of the kitchen to sing a few Patsy Cline songs. The band, playing more softly so we can hear the girl's voice, has been tirelessly playing country music with fiddle and guitars for a couple of hours and appears relieved to accompany her. She sings "Crazy." The evening stretches out around me, smooth as black ice.

Grover's Corners is a place I've learned a lot about simply by observing what goes on. In a few weeks my students will read Wilder's play *Our Town*, a drama about hope and loss, love and death, issues woven throughout our town. Will Wilder's characters, Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs, who work tirelessly to make a home, speak to my students? Will my students see their own mothers in a more sympathetic way? Will they begin to imagine the power of love—marriage—death in our town?

Literature like *Our Town* gives me the strength to be here, in the classroom, with these kids. It gives me a reason to be here, and I want my students to experience it the way I do. My students don't use literature as a retrospective tool yet. At least not school literature. For them, school is separate from life, from their commu-

nity. This I understand. Often I don't want "school life" to creep into my personal life, and vice versa. I can't find 100 percent fulfillment in the

classroom, and neither can they. But I keep looking for ways to integrate the intellectual and the emotional.

The young woman inside the burger joint finishes the last sustained note of "Crazy," and everyone claps. We finish our burgers and fries and even find room for a creamie. Everyone is hanging around the car show to find out which car will win the trophy. There are categories, and several cars win for this or that. But the overall big winner for the night is one that my youngest child picked out, the '38 Ford pickup truck. This is Grover's Corners, rural America, small town U.S.A. I look around at the many familiar faces of students, shopkeepers, colleagues, and know it has, for me, become our town. 🍷