

RECOVERING ABUNDANCE
TWELVE PRACTICES FOR SMALL-TOWN LEADERS
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To the ordinary leaders who are doing the hidden but holy work of renewing their small towns and rural regions

“What we need is here.” —Wendell Berry, “The Wild Geese”

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INTRODUCTION

I WOKE UP ON NOVEMBER 9, 2016, and gazed out the window at what looked like another cool and crisp autumn day in central Ohio. But it wasn't just another day. It was the day after election day in a presidential election year. I had been following the campaigns closely and watched the results as they came in the night before, but I fell asleep at about two o'clock in the morning. The small television in my room stayed on after I fell asleep, so it was still on when I awoke. I didn't have to wait long before learning the election had been decided.

Donald Trump was going to be our next president.

I stood shocked, holding the remote loosely in my hand and watching the news a little longer to make sure I hadn't heard incorrectly. All the models and predictions had agreed that Hillary Rodham Clinton was going to win, possibly with a historic margin. How did this happen? How did we not see this coming? Where did this surge of support come from, and what did it mean?

Of course, I wasn't the only one taken by surprise at Trump's victory. My friends processed their shock on social media. Scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed, I witnessed posts ranging from elation to devastation. Whether they were protesting or partying, almost all agreed that they hadn't seen it coming.

The following weeks inspired commentary from a host of political pundits doing their best to make sense of this anomaly. Before long, a consensus emerged. We were told that the surprising success of Donald Trump's campaign could be attributed to a particular demographic of Americans who have long felt left out and left behind in America's social and economic transformation. This disaffected population was known as the "white working class."

The white working class label was broadly applied but generally referred to white folks without a college degree who worked in blue-collar jobs. They could be found across the rust belt of the Midwest, the small towns of Appalachia, and rural regions across the country. They were typically resistant to social change and had been victimized by automation and bad trade deals.

This cacophony of commentary converged into a national narrative. According to this common story, the white working class, largely made up of rural voters, were the antagonists. Economically disenfranchised and resentful of social change, they made their voices heard through the "strong man leader" named Donald Trump. He would stand up for them and set things right. He would toss aside elitism and political correctness and make America great again.

Eager to capitalize on the media attention, some advocates for rural revitalization confirmed the story, emphasizing the cultural breakdown and spiritual poverty of rural communities. At the time, the story made sense to me, and I adopted it as my interpretive lens for understanding what was going on with my rural neighbors and fellow citizens.

I had only recently moved back to my hometown in rural Ohio, and I was trying to reacquaint myself with the people and places that so shaped the first two decades of my life. I was completing my seminary program and was eager to integrate all the things I had studied about social justice and spiritual formation with what I was experiencing in my rural context. It seemed like all the resources about social justice were directed to people in urban settings.

And it seemed like the spiritual formation resources were directed to people living a suburban lifestyle.

After the election I listened intently to proponents of this national narrative, and I read relentlessly about rural issues. I learned about the economic, cultural, and moral breakdown experienced by many rural communities and small towns. I saw the patterns of decline and devastation that brought suffering to rural Americans and seemed to foster a spirit of resentment and despair. I read books like *Hillbilly Elegy*, in which J. D. Vance offered a critique of working-class folks from his Kentucky childhood and ultimately concluded: “There is a cultural movement in the white working class to blame problems on society or the government, and that movement gains adherents by the day.”[1] And I read articles like one in the *Wall Street Journal* that outlined troubling trends in rural communities across America, declaring them the “new inner city.” I didn’t believe President Trump would be their savior, but I had empathy for rural and rust belt folks who voted “against their interests” because they were in pain.

THE REST OF THE STORY

However, as I dug deeper into the stories of my neighbors and learned more about individuals and groups working on projects of rural renewal, I began to uncover a new story. Or at least, as Paul Harvey would say, “the rest of the story.” Yes, there were indeed folks who were looking for a strong man with a big mouth to be their angry advocate. Yes, there is real prejudice and ignorance in rural communities. And yes, there is very real pain and oppression. But there are also folks who aren’t waiting for an intervention from big government or big business. Instead of waiting, they are working. Working to build inclusive, thriving, local economies. Working to weave a welcoming social fabric in their region. Working to start new businesses, revive old buildings, and co-create a positive future for their small town.

Before I learned these stories, I was utterly unaware of all the projects going on across the country led by so many ordinary—yet extraordinary—people. I had no idea how much I didn’t know. When I discovered this new story, I realized how the old story, though perhaps meant to inspire empathy and aid, is actually disempowering. It perpetuates the idea that rural folks are backwoods and backward and can only be helped by powerful leaders from our nation’s urban centers, whether those leaders be liberal technocrats or conservative swamp-drainers. But I know that rural folks are competent and creative, resourceful and resilient. Good public policy can go a long way but only in partnership with the folks who are already leading their communities and loving their neighbors in often hidden but important ways.

AN ALTERNATIVE STORY

I realized that this new narrative was the one I needed to learn more about and lift up as an example. After all, stories are powerful. They don’t just tell us about what happened in the past. They interpret the present and impact the future. They influence how we direct energies and resources. The philosopher Ivan Illich argued that neither revolution nor reformation could truly transform society without a new, persuasive, inclusive story. “If you want to change a society,” he insisted, “then you have to tell an alternative story.”[2]

Likewise, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber tells the tale about his grandfather who had limited mobility and spent most of his time in a wheelchair. One day his grandfather was

telling the story about his favorite teacher, who would jump and dance when he prayed. Buber's grandfather got so swept away in imitating his teacher that he was cured of his disability and began jumping and dancing. That's how you tell a story, Buber said.[3]

Indeed, stories have healing and transformative power. In her TED Talk about "the dangers of a single story," Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie insists on the importance of telling multiple stories about places and people. "The single story creates stereotypes," she said, "and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." This has often been true for small towns and rural communities. Sometimes those stories have been used to dismiss and dispossess rural folks, and sometimes those stories were used to attract pity and public awareness. But the old story, when told as the dominant narrative, is a single story that leaves out some really important and inspiring stories. Thankfully, the storytelling continues, and we, as ordinary leaders, have the power to shape our own stories. "Stories can break the dignity of a people," said Adichie, "but stories can also repair that broken dignity." [4]

I want to tell an alternative story about small towns and rural regions, one that helps "repair that broken dignity." Not a story about decline and desperation for outside intervention but a story about the agency and creativity of what I call "ordinary leaders" from within those communities. Not a story about scarcity and depravity but of abundance and generosity. This alternative story not only fills out the narrow narrative that is pervasive in our time, but it also shapes our intention and direction as we work to repair and renew our communities. Because we don't just tell stories, we live them. And the stories we tell become the stories we live.

THE OLD-NEW STORY

Do you know someone who tells the same stories over and over again? Maybe it's a relative with memory challenges who constantly forgets which stories they have told you and which they haven't. Maybe it's a spouse who likes holding a past failure over your head to make sure you never forget it. Or maybe it's a buddy who likes reliving the glory days by retelling stories from high school every time you get together.

Stories that matter are told and retold. They keep popping up and inserting themselves into our conversations and reflections. Interestingly enough, as I was learning about this new, alternative story about rural communities, an ancient story from the gospels kept coming up. The new story I was discovering was being shaped by this old story. Actually, it's a very old story. But also one that is somehow ever new.

This ancient-new story is sometimes called the story of Jesus feeding the multitude or, often, the feeding of the five thousand.

This gospel story about a prophetic picnic in a rural region was one of those "told and retold stories" that kept coming up in early Christian communities. Apparently, this story conveyed and mediated something important about Jesus and his kingdom way. We will unpack these themes in subsequent chapters, but suffice it to say that this story reminded early Christians of important truths that spoke to them again and again in different situations and settings. It was so meaningful to these early communities that all four gospels include a version of the story. It's actually the only miracle story that has such a claim to fame. Not even the Christmas story makes it into all four gospels. This gospel story has also stood the test of time, impacting countless lives across the centuries. And I believe this ancient story has contemporary relevance for folks seeking to tell and live a new story in rural communities.

It's a moving and inspiring story. Yet it can be tempting to read it as awe-inspiring in a reverent way but not actionable in a relevant way. We can read it as a story about a messianic leader and the miracle he performed a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. But I will argue that the story's reach is much wider and deeper. Jesus transformed a situation of scarcity and decline into a story of abundance and renewal. And he did so in an instructional and invitational way. Jesus was teaching his disciples and by extension, teaching us, how to live a new story.

To get the most out of this book, I encourage you to reframe the way you read this gospel story. Read it many times at different paces, in different places, and with different people as you work your way through this book. Read it as a story about Jesus, a rural leader whose story continues to transform the world. Also read it as a parable about life and leadership in a rural setting that "speaks to your condition," as Quakers say.

The story is often called the feeding of the five thousand, putting the emphasis on Jesus's divine power and glory. That's partly true, of course. But it's also the story of Jesus feeding with the five thousand. Jesus initiated the miracle but invited his disciples and even the crowd to participate in the process. I believe you and I, as ordinary leaders, are invited to partner with God in making miracles within our contexts, though they may not feel quite so dramatic.

LEADING THE NEW STORY

I'll be talking a lot about the importance of ordinary leaders, so let me clarify who I mean by that. Ordinary leaders often don't consider themselves leaders. They generally avoid the spotlight and don't pursue fancy titles. But they are eager to make a difference, help their neighbors, and build a better future for their family and community. They are entrepreneurs, pastors, parents, mayors, educators, farmers, activists, and more.

Ordinary leaders have many of the qualities common among all leaders: integrity, vision, courage, and so forth. But ordinary leaders are defined by at least three specific qualities: ownership, membership, and influence.

Ordinary leaders practice *radical ownership*. They own the problems and possibilities of their community. They don't deny the diverse factors that contribute to the problems that plague their region, but neither do they wait for an outside intervention to start organizing, collaborating, and creating for positive change. They welcome fresh resources injected into their community, but instead of blaming or begging, they focus on uncovering and developing the assets already available.

Ordinary leaders also inhabit their community as *rooted members*. They are not looking for the next big thing somewhere else. They view their community as home, not a hotel. They are committed to their people and their place and are sticking with them long enough to gain invaluable local knowledge and social capital. Not only are they committed to sticking around, but they enjoy life in their town. It's not always easy, but they are motivated by a sense of love and solidarity. They understand why Wendell Berry said, "It all turns on affection."^[5]

Also, ordinary leaders exercise *relational influence* rather than rely on positional authority. They may or may not hold a position of authority, but they have trust, respect, and social capital in the community. They exercise voluntary responsibility for their community's

well-being and value the relationships that keep the community strong. Because of their ownership, membership, and relationships, people trust them enough to show up and join in when this ordinary leader proposes a call to action.

Does that sound like you or someone you know? Or does that sound like someone you want to become? If so, let's learn to lead together.

PRACTICING THE NEW STORY

The truth is that learning how to live the new story of abundance and renewal is going to take some practice. That's why this book is about practices. We learn by doing then reflecting on that doing as we become reflective practitioners in our context. Personal and community renewal isn't about trying to make a difference; it's about training to become different (and at the same time, more fully ourselves). We have been socialized to envision and embody the old story, so we have to be trained to walk in the ways of the new.

When I say "practices," I mean disciplines and rhythms that cultivate abundant life within us and around us. I invite you to think about practices in terms of both spiritual formation and civic virtues. Put another way, these twelve practices are ways to both form our personal wellness and wholeness (for Christians, this means "Christ-likeness") and shape our communities into just and flourishing places to live. These twelve practices help us experience, embody, and expand the abundant kind of life that Jesus modeled. They help us learn and live the new story of abundance and renewal, even when the default story is scarcity and decline.

There's a Zen story that illustrates the value of practices. Three monks decided to meditate together beside a nearby lake. After they closed their eyes and began to concentrate, the first monk suddenly stood up and said, "I forgot my prayer mat!" Remarkably, he stepped right onto the water in front of him and crossed, striding across the lake. He grabbed his mat from the hut and walked on the water all the way back. After he returned, the three monks closed their eyes again and began to concentrate. They were just about to settle into their meditation when the second monk jumped up and said, "I also forgot my prayer mat!" Amazingly, he too stepped right onto the water, fetched his prayer mat, and returned, striding upon the water.

For the third time, the monks once again closed their eyes and prepared to meditate. The third monk decided that this must be some kind of test, so he was eager to learn and even more eager to prove himself. He stood up, rushed to the water's edge, and stepped in confidently. He abruptly sank and found himself in water over his head. Determined and frustrated, the monk dragged himself out of the water and tried again. He sank. He tried again; no miracle. After watching this for a time, the first monk turned to the second and said, "Do you think we should tell him where the stones are?"

Thankfully, Jesus isn't secretive or stingy with wisdom. He does not just stand back and laugh when we fall into the water. He tells us where the stones are. Jesus shows us how to use the stepping-stones of civic-spiritual practices to experience and expand abundance. In fact, he wants to teach us his ways and watch us do "even greater things" (John 14:12).

Within this gospel story, we witness twelve practices, or stepping-stones. Each helps us embody the new story that Jesus called abundant life, available for all people in all places,

not least in the rural communities and villages that were close to Jesus's heart as a rural leader.

Having a clear path makes a big difference. Knowing where the stones are makes miracles possible. Yet it's not really about a formula or method. It's about an apprenticeship and partnership with the one who walked on water and walked on the earth in such a way that renewal followed his footsteps. After all, as Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now."^[6] Hanh wrote a book called *Peace Is Every Step* in which he reminded readers that we can experience and extend peace in our ordinary lives and our everyday interactions. I would like to borrow the idea and apply it to our work for renewal. Renewal is every step. Every day and every interaction provide an opportunity for renewal, and the twelve practices help us see and seize those opportunities that are given to us. May we learn to walk in such a way that renewal is every step and our lives manifest the possibilities of a new story.

Let's take the first step.

