



DISCOVERING *the* UNIVERSE *of* HOME

Renowned Minnesota author, teacher, and speaker Paul Gruchow presented the following essay at the Minnesota Historical Society's 1997 Theodore C. Blegen Memorial Conference, dedicated to exploring issues and themes in grass-roots history. Drawing on a wellspring of personal experience, he examines the links between our lives and the land and the importance of teaching local history to our children.

*Exemplifying his belief in diversity, Gruchow is a farm and bookstore owner and freelance writer whose publications include essays, reviews, environmental journalism, and books. Among these are *Boundary Waters: The Grace of the Wild* (1997) and *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home* (1995), winner of the 1996 Minnesota Book Award for nonfiction, from which this talk was excerpted.*

PAUL GRUCHOW

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I BELIEVE THAT HISTORY is the primary act of the human imagination. Let me try to explain what I mean by telling you a story, a bit of my own history:

What if one's life were not a commodity, not something to be bartered to the highest bidder, or made to order? What if one's life were governed by needs more fundamental than acceptance or admiration? What if one were simply to go home and plant some manner of garden?

To plant a garden is to enter the continuum of time. Each seed carries in its genome the history that will propel it into the future, and in planting it we stretch one of the long threads of our culture into tomorrow.

A home, like a garden, exists as much in time as in space. A home is the place in the present where one's past and one's future come together, the crossroads between history and heaven. I learned this truth the day we buried my mother.

In the previous month I had felt often like a man without an anchor. We were living in St. Paul and expecting our first child. For my wife it was a difficult and somewhat dangerous pregnancy. Christmas passed and the days turned toward the new year. The baby was overdue. In those same days, Mother was lying in a hospital bed in Montevideo, Minnesota, emaciated and in pain. She had already lost a brave battle against cancer but was unwilling, just yet, to concede defeat, for reasons that were, to me, mysterious. She was long past delusion about her prospects. My own heart resided in both places, full of fear and hope at the same time. I did not know where my body should be.

On the penultimate day of the old year, the baby, after a stubborn resistance of her own, finally came. She was big and beautiful and healthy. She gave one lusty cry as she entered the world and then lay quietly while she was bathed and dressed, looking about the room in wide-eyed wonder.

I telephoned Mother with the news. She said with surprising energy that she hoped she might see the baby before she died. But that day a fierce cold front settled over Minnesota. For more than a week, daytime temperatures did not rise above zero. We were terrified, as I suppose first-time parents always are, of our responsibilities. The baby seemed so helpless and fragile. We dared not risk the three-hour drive to the hospital.

One cloudy morning in mid-January the weather at last broke. We bundled up the baby and made a dash for Montevideo. In the darkened hospital room, we introduced grandmoth-

er and granddaughter. The baby slept against the rails of the bed while Mother fondled her with eyes too big for their bony sockets. They joined hands, the baby's soft, fat, and warm, Mother's cold, gaunt, and hard. With tremendous effort, Mother whispered three words barely audible above the hum of the humidifier.

"Is she healthy?" she asked. We wept because she was.

When we arrived back home, the telephone was ringing. A nurse was on the line with the word, hardly news, that Mother had died.

The weather was still bitter and gray the day we buried her in the little cemetery at St. John's Lutheran Church. After the ceremony we three children—Kathy, Paulette, and I—who felt strangely like children again that day, vulnerable and bewildered in an impossibly big world, took refuge one last time in the farmhouse where we had laughed and cried, together and alone, so many times.

We had meant to see to the household goods. There would be few other opportunities

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for it; we lived at a distance from one another and seldom found ourselves together. But almost the first albums we came across were the photo albums.

We sat in the living room then, not bothering to light the lamp, looking at the pictures and talking until the day died.

"Do you remember when Mother turned toward the back seat of the car and said, 'Where's your sister?' and Paul said, 'Oh, she fell out a long time ago,' and she *had?*"

"Do you remember the day Mother told the neighbor she couldn't go to the Women's Christian Temperance Union meeting because her wine was ready for bottling?"

"Do you remember the day Grandmother sat down to play the piano for the pastor, and the moment she hit the first chord the dog began to yowl?"

"Do you remember the morning we floated a pound of butter in Mother's hot laundry starch?"

"Do you remember the time you threw a stick at Cousin Lyle and it stuck in the top of his head and twanged back and forth like an arrow

and he had to go to the doctor to have it removed?”

Do you remember?

Do you remember?

The stories tumbled as if out of an overstuffed closet. Sometimes we had three of them going at once. We laughed until we ached. I remember it now as one of the happiest afternoons of my life, the metamorphosis of a friendship deepening as the years pass and we three face our own mortalities. I think that I have never been more exactly at home, more tenaciously alive, than that afternoon, when old joy and new sorrow and present love reverberated together inside me.

All history is ultimately local and personal. To tell what we remember and to keep on telling it is to keep the past alive in the present. Should we not do so, we could not know, in the deepest sense, how to inhabit a place. To inhabit a place means literally to have made it a

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habit, to have made it the custom and ordinary practice of our lives, to have learned how to wear a place like a familiar garment, like the garments of sanctity that nuns once wore. The word habit, in its now dim original form, meant *to own*. We own places not because we possess the deeds to them, but because they have entered the continuum of our lives. What is strange to us—unfamiliar—can never be home.

It is the fashion just now to disparage nostalgia. Nostalgia, we believe, is a cheap emotion. But we forget what it means. In its Greek roots it means, literally, the return to home. It came into currency as a medical word in nineteenth-century Germany to describe the failure to thrive of the displaced persons—including my own ancestors—who had crowded into that country from the east. Nostalgia is the clinical term for homesickness, for the desire to be rooted in a place—to know clearly, that is, what time it is. This desire need not imply the impulse to turn back the clock, which, of course, we cannot do. It recognizes,

rather, the truth—if home is a place in time—that we cannot know where we are now unless we can remember where we have come from. The real romantics are those who believe that history is the story of the triumphal march of progress, that change is indiscriminately for the better. Those who would demythologize the past seem to forget that we also construct the present as a myth, that there is nothing in the wide universe so vast as our own ignorance. Knowing that is our one real hope.

NOW, ONE MIGHT RAISE two obvious questions about this story, or about any story like it: first, is it true; and second, even supposing it is true, why does it matter?

To the question of truthfulness, I might reply that the story is as honest and accurate as I know how to make it. So far as I am concerned, it is a faithful and dependable record of a series of events that really did happen. Were you to press me, however, I would be obliged to concede that many others who were involved in these same events would answer much differently. I know this because I published the story and then listened to the responses.

My younger sister said, “You know, I was eight years younger than you when all of this happened, just a kid really, and still living at home. I’m happy to have your story because it’s not at all like the one I remember, so it causes me to think about those events in an entirely new way.”

My twin sister said, “You know I was the one who fell out of that car, and what you don’t tell is that we were on the way to the hospital so I could have the bandages removed from my legs after I had burned them in that bonfire, and because of the damage that fall did, I had to wear those bandages for another six weeks. Why did you leave that part out?” And I had to say I had left those details out because I had completely forgotten them.

I had a letter from my mother’s doctor, who didn’t need to say anything at all to remind me that Mother did not survive to see our first child solely out of her own grit but also because of the remarkably compassionate and dedicated care of a young family practitioner who in the end didn’t even charge a fee for his services. Surely I ought to have mentioned that, but it, too, had escaped my memory.

I saw an old neighbor who said, “You know, the week before your mother went into the hospital for the last time, we went over to visit her and she was down to her last stick of firewood. We had to bring her wood for the furnace or she

might have frozen to death.” Those words stung as much as they were meant to sting. That was something I hadn’t known, a measure of my own neglectfulness which I had failed to confront.

And then, not long after the book in which I told this story was published, I happened upon a file I didn’t know existed containing the weekly letters my mother wrote to me while I was in college. As I read them, I realized that I had allowed the image of my mother as a woman dying in her midforties to overshadow, even to obliterate, the woman I had known while she was still healthy, a woman who took a rural pride in working hard, who teased constantly and laughed loudly, who was frank to a fault, and who humiliated me when I was a young man trying to get on as a sophisticate in the strange new world of the city by sending me back to the college campus after weekend visits home with grocery sacks full of unwashed garden produce and then writing to my roommates seeking assurance that I was eating the good farm vegetables she had sent instead of the pig feed they sold at the grocery stores. “And is he sharing his vegetables like I asked?” she would inquire. “I bet he isn’t, ha ha.” There were a lot of ha-has in her letters; she never trusted written words to convey their real meaning, which in her case was often two-edged.

I realized when I read those letters that there is an important woman in my past whom I’ll have to try to get to know all over again, a woman considerably more complicated and interesting than the one I had remembered despite a good deal of effort at the remembrance.

Still, I find myself saying when I go back to the story I did write about the woman I did remember that however incomplete it may be, however narrow in its point of view, it nevertheless expresses something I believe to be true about her, about me, and about us.

Does it matter whether my story is true? That’s not for me to judge, except in this respect: it matters deeply if mine is to be the only story that survives about my mother. If mine is the only story that survives, no matter how conscientious and thorough I have been about writing it, the memory that endures of my mother will be in some important way untrue, not because anything in particular about my story is false, but because it is a story, and like all stories, like all versions of history, it is necessarily selective.

IT SEEMS LIKELY, when our present time has passed into history, that this will come to be characterized as the moment in western culture

when we first fully realized and appreciated the importance of diversity, how our lives both in biology and in culture are strengthened, extended, and enriched by variations of all kinds, and, on the other hand, how perilous our lives become when we tie them to single points of view, however meritorious those points of view may be in themselves.

Here is a story about that:

Only a little more than a century ago, there lived on the prairies a people who had staked their lives and fortunes upon the buffalo. The

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buffalo once existed in seemingly inexhaustible numbers. There were, perhaps, 60,000,000 of them. When Coronado, the first European to see the prairies, traveled to Kansas from Mexico in 1541, a journey of several months, he reported that he was never once beyond sight of them.

If you were born into plains culture in those days, you were wrapped in swaddling clothes made from the soft skin of a buffalo calf and carried about until you could walk in a cradle lined with the pulverized dung of the buffalo, which served as a diaper. You grew into an adult life dependent in every particular upon the buffalo. It supplied you with food, with raiment, with

shelter, with tools, with household furnishings, with paints and dyes, with cosmetics, with fuel.

And when you died, you were buried or raised upon a platform in a coffin made of buffalo hide. The buffalo was literally the beginning and the ending of your existence. You would have believed that the buffalo was eternal.

And then came the Europeans, whose railroad lines and fences and plows and relentless hunting reduced the buffalo nearly to extinction. This decimation threatened the survival of plains culture, as Americans knew. The United States Congress passed a bill in the 1860s to protect the few hundred buffalo that still survived, out of the tens of millions. President Grant vetoed it on the advice of his secretary of war, who said that to get rid of the buffalo was to get rid of the Indian problem.

There arose, then, among the desperate Native Americans, a shaman who said that the buffalo had not died, that they had merely gone

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down into the safety of the underworld. If the people, the shaman preached, would say the right prayers and perform the right dances, the buffalo would return and their way of life would be saved. So all across the prairies, the people danced and prayed. But Americans, despite their Constitution, outlawed this new aspect of native religions, the Ghost Dance.

In South Dakota, in December of 1890, a group of Lakotas danced in defiance of the ban. When ordered to quit, they left their reservation and headed for the Badlands, where they might dance and pray in peace. Along the way they were set upon by American cavalry and slaughtered, men, women, and children alike. The few survivors were carried to a nearby mission and laid out on the sanctuary floor to be treated for their wounds. Above the altar, hung for the Christmas season, was a banner reading, “Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men.” The place was Wounded Knee.

This was the last battle of a long war. The buffalo were not, after all, eternal.

Today we have made in the same places a culture as dependent upon corn as the Dakota culture was upon buffalo. A person born in our time will be clothed as an infant in a diaper made in part of corn and fed a formula based upon corn syrup. That person will grow into adult life sustained in thousands of ways by products made from, packaged in, or manufactured with derivatives of corn, from every kind of food except fresh fish to plastics, textiles, building materials, machine parts, soaps and cosmetics, even highways. And when that person dies, some laws require that the body should be embalmed—in a fluid made in part from corn.

We have not begun to imagine a life without corn. We have assumed, by the default of failing to think about it, that corn is eternal. But it is not any more eternal than the buffalo. In fact, because the corn we cultivate shares a common cytoplasm, it would take exactly one persistent pathogen to devastate our culture as we know it.

Just as too narrow a dependence upon the physical sources of our sustenance is dangerous, so a culture that relies upon too narrow a set of ideas can be imperiled in the long run, and so, within that culture, the usefulness of memory, of history, can be fatally weakened when there are too few stories about what really happened. A culture with only one version of its past is as untenable in the long run as a prairie with only one species of grass, and for the same reason: that it is too poor in resources to meet the challenges of change.

STILL, ONE MIGHT ASK, of what use is the past? What’s done is done and cannot be undone; we can’t go back and live in the past; and, despite the old bromide about being condemned to repeat the history we can’t remember, we seem to make the same mistakes over and over again, no matter how keen our memories.

I’d say that the past is vital because it is primarily through the agency of thinking about history that we come to a sense of the ideal. In remembering what has gone before, we are inevitably reminded of what we have especially hated or cherished, and this information equips us to imagine a world better than the one we currently inhabit. History gives us the imagination, in other words, to plan for the future.

But let me remind you what happens all the time when we use history in just this way.

Suppose I said, “Do you remember the time when the lake here at the edge of our town was a clear-water lake with a hard bottom, when it teemed with ducks in the fall and produced

lunker northerns in the summer? Do you remember how practically everybody in town used to go down to the lake on Sunday afternoons in the summer to picnic and swim and loll about in the shade afterwards? Do you remember that there was even a resort on our lake not so many decades ago, and that people used to come on the train all the way from Chicago to vacation here? I don't suppose we'll ever attract tourists from Chicago again, or even great flocks of ducks in the fall, but don't you think it would be terrific if we could make a clean lake again, one we didn't mind swimming in, one that produced fish the Health Department thought it was safe to eat? What do you suppose it would take to bring our lake back to health?"

Or suppose I said, "Do you remember what it was like at harvest time in the countryside during the days of the big steam threshing rigs? Do you remember how all the neighbors got together and went from farm to farm, the whole community pitching in to get the work done in time. Oh, it was hard, hot work, both in the fields pitching those big bundles of wheat, and in the kitchens where the women labored to produce two big lunches and a noontime feast every day. But you know, the work somehow seemed to go easier when it was done in that kind of company, and there was always wonderful food and time for talk and laughter.

"Oh, the stories that flew when we were making the threshing rounds! Everybody was always glad enough to see the hard labor come to an end, but the days afterwards always seemed uncomfortably lonely and quiet, too. What do you suppose would happen if we found ways now and then to do some of our work together as a community again? Don't you think that would be a good thing?"

Or suppose I said, "Do you remember what this town was like when it still had a school? I think our community was a little more lively in those days, don't you? It seemed like there was always something going on at the school—a band concert, or a basketball game, or a Halloween spook house, or a play. I think the school and the achievements of our children gave us all something to take pride in, a sense of community that we don't seem to have anymore. I know there are too few children here these days to hope that we'll have our school back anytime soon, but I wonder if there aren't some things we can do to put the children here in town back at the center of our lives again. Don't you think that would be good for our town?"

If I said any such thing in most of the mid-western communities I have known, this is the response I would inevitably get: "Well, thanks for mentioning that idea, Paul. We appreciate your sharing that. But you know, you've got to get a grip. Those good old days you're talking about? I tell you, I wouldn't trade my electric lights and my running water for those good old days of yours for all the tea in China. That's just nostalgia you're talking about there, Paul."

"I'm talking about community values and you're talking about personal conveniences, and those are not at all equivalents," I might protest, or, "I like plumbing and electricity, too, but maybe material progress and social progress are different objectives, achieved in different ways." But it would be no use. We have been taught to use the cudgel of nostalgia to beat the imagination out of history.

Here is another way in which we deprive our children of the power of history. We do it by failing to teach them about the places in which they have been raised.

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The schools in which I myself was educated were by most standards first-rate. But they were, as our schools often have been, largely indifferent to the place and the culture in which they operated.

Among my science courses I took two full years of biology, but I never learned that the beautiful meadow at the bottom of my family's pasture was remnant virgin prairie. We did not spend, so far as I can remember, a single hour on prairies—the landscape in which we were immersed—in two years of biological study.

I took history courses for years, but I never learned that one of the founders of my town and for decades its leading banker—the man who platted the town and organized its school system, its library, its parks, and its fire department—was also the author of the first comprehensive treatise on Minnesota's prairie botany. I can only imagine now what it might have meant to me—a studious boy with a love of nature—to know that a great scholar of natural history had made a full and satisfying life in my town. I did not know until long after I left the

place that it afforded the possibility of an intellectual life.

I read, in the course of 12 years of English instruction, many useful and stimulating books, but I never learned that someone who had won a National Book Award for poetry—Robert Bly—lived and worked on a farm only 30 miles from my house. The countryside was full of writers, I would later discover, but I did not meet anybody who had written a book until I went away to college. I had not imagined, or been encouraged to imagine, that it was possible to live in the country and to write books, too. Nor did I suspect it was possible to write books about our countryside. We read Sir Walter Scott, John Steinbeck, and Robert Frost, but not O.E. Rølvaag or Black Elk, Lois Hudson or Thomas McGrath, Meridel LeSeuer or Frederick Manfred. We did not read them at the University of

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Minnesota, either. I was left to unearth by my own devices, years later, the whole fine literature of my place.

I studied industrial arts with a man who taught me how to make a wooden nightstand and an electrical motor; I did not learn until many years later that on his own time he made wonderful lithographs and woodblock prints of the prairie landscape. I grew up believing that scenery consisted of mountains and waterfalls and deer, rendered on black velvet, and that there was nothing worth seeing in our own tedious flatlands.

I studied vocational agriculture. I learned how to identify 30 common weeds and how to formulate a good pig ration but nothing of the history of farming and nothing that might have encouraged me to think critically or creatively about how we farm. My father was an organic farmer. What I mainly learned from my vocational agriculture classes was that he was a nut.

Nothing in my education prepared me to believe, or encouraged me to expect, that there was any reason to be interested in my own place. If I hoped to amount to anything, I understood, I had better take the first road east out of town as fast as I could. And, like so many of my classmates, I did.

WHEN WE FAIL TO TEACH our children how to inhabit the places where they have been raised—when we don’t teach them the stories, the customs, the practices, the nature of those places—then we also fail to teach them how to be at home anywhere.

But suppose local history, culture, and natural history were at the center of our teaching. Wouldn’t that, you might well ask, just encourage parochialism and xenophobia, and don’t we already have those attributes in more than adequate supply?

I would argue, on the contrary, that parochialism and xenophobia are fed by the suspicion that all the really important things happen somewhere else. One of the magical effects of freeing the imagination to go to work in the place where it finds itself is how this enlarges the world.

One might say about country places, about midwestern places, about Minnesota places, what is said all the time with such assurance and authority that even the people who live in them often accept them as true: that such places are mediocre, that they are sleepy, that they are places in which ambition is either absent or irrelevant—there is not, for example, in Lake Wobegon a single person with a shred of ambition—that they are simple, whatever that means.

Such perceptions, believed, have a way of becoming self-fulfilling.

But the fact is that the same dramas and miracles of life occur in Windom as in Tokyo. People are born, they struggle to live worthy and productive lives, they are challenged by fate, buffeted by setbacks and disappointments, heartened in unexpected hours, visited by evil and grace alike, and come to sudden and premature or to lingering and overdue deaths everywhere in the world.

The great spectacles of nature, of fire and wind, of rain and ice, of heat and cold, of metamorphosis, of birth and death, of struggle and decay, of quiet and beauty visit alike the prairies of southwestern Minnesota and the burroughs of New York City.

Ankara or Timbuktu can be reached as certainly from the hills of southeastern Minnesota

as from Amsterdam or Buenos Aires. Everywhere, as the native Minnesotans said, is the center of the world.

What happens when you apply the imagination of history to the events of any place, however small, is that its connections with all the rest of the universe then come into view. I came to this sense of the interconnectedness of all things through the land that I knew intimately as a boy. Land is, after all, before anything else, an historical document.

I lived, when I was a boy, by the blue light of the moon along country lanes so quiet I could hear the town traffic miles away, visible only as a burst of mysterious light on the distant horizon. Fireflies flashed in the road ditches, and long leaves of corn sighed in the evening breezes. Here and there a dog barked in a farmyard. The sound of dogs barking in the night, of their barks echoing across the vast, empty countryside, was the surfacing sound of the wildness in them. I could hear in their voices the ancient cries of gray wolves in the days when great herds of bison roamed the plains and the moonlight danced in the endless waves of grass. I could feel then the wildness in my own bones.

And I lived in a woodpile, in a plum thicket, in the striped shade of an August cornfield where the whirligigs raced across the sweltering landscape, showering dust like rain. And in a prairie meadow, among overgrazed river bluffs, on a granite island in a widening of the river, along a grassy fenceline where a lone green ash grew.

But mainly I dwelled along the river under the spell of its mysterious waters, which ran to the Minnesota River, then into the Mississippi River, then down the central nervous cord of the continent, over the plains of Iowa, through the hills of Missouri and Arkansas, across the bayous of Louisiana, and into the Gulf of Mexico.

In my house there were many mansions.

When I sat on the overhanging limb of a willow tree dangling my bare feet into the brown Chippewa River, feeling the slow, steady tug of its unfailing current against my toes, I became connected to the great body of the continent. I was linked not merely with a small river in western Minnesota but swept up into the gigantic stream of life. I lived then in the piney waters of the North Woods, in the thundering waters of St. Anthony Falls, in the icy rush of mountain streams, in the stagnant backwaters of southern marshes, in the oceanic brine. I shared then a mansion with my little bullheads, yes, but also with ancient paddlefishes and cutthroat trout and sharks and catfishes as big as logs. I lived then among bald eagles and alligators and pan-

thers. I lived where it always snows and where it never snows, high in the mountains and at the edge of the sea.

As a high-school biology student, I once traced the cardiovascular system of a domestic cat whose blood vessels had been injected with a rubbery substance, blue for the veins, red for the arteries. Beginning at the heart, I traced the vessels up into its skull and down into its toes and out along its tail, following them as they branched into smaller and smaller streams. It was an ecstatic experience; I carried my half-excavated specimen home in a clear plastic bag, unable to bear the suspense of waiting until the next day's class to discover where all the vessels ran. No one would sit in the same bus seat with me, but I was too excited to mind. There in the body of the cat lay a map of the world as I perceived it from my vantage point along the

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Chippewa River. I might be one tiny red corpuscle swimming in the slenderest of the tail arteries, but I was an undeniable part of something big and alive, a constituent particle of the whole organism. I had seen the universe in a two-dollar laboratory specimen.

THE WORK THAT ALL OF YOU have set upon here, the work of bringing the history of this state and of its many places alive, of making that history available to the imaginations of Minnesotans, both opens the future of Minnesota to intelligent choices and establishes the connections between this state and all the rest of the universe. It is work that makes Minnesota, quite literally, a bigger, and richer, and stronger place, and for that all of us owe you a debt of thanks and praise.

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