

Why You Should Stay in Your Hometown

On the whole, it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born. —T.S. Eliot, Notes towards the Definition of Culture

Americans have never learned to cherish permanence. Alexis de Tocqueville once said that an American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and abandon it just as the trees are bearing fruit; and he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest. Things have not changed. Today, according to demographers, Americans move on average once every five years. The home is now a temporary stopping place rather than a permanent habitation.

By some rare chance, I escaped this rush of mobility. I grew up on the street where my family has lived for four generations and in a city that was home to my ancestors before the Civil War. As a Benedictine monk, I will eventually take vows to live out the rest of my life in the same city, on the grounds of the Abbey of St. Mary and St. Louis. When I die, my body will be buried in the community's cemetery just beside the abbey walls. I have inherited and now freely embrace a wonderful gift: permanence. I have learned, furthermore, that permanence is not merely a matter of taste—something to be embraced by the sedentary and eschewed by the restless—but a deep societal value. It is the guardian of family, tradition, practical wisdom, environment, and culture. I will argue, therefore, that the American disregard for permanence is not merely a national idiosyncrasy. It is a defect in our national character.

The first benefit of permanence is the preservation of the family. Today, our understanding of the family has been winnowed down to a household composed of two parents and their children (under the best of circumstances). But this is a mutilated understanding. The family is larger. It includes ancestors, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces and posterity, as well as parents and their children. Staying permanently in one place allows a wide range of family members to preserve a common life. It allows them to work, worship, and spend leisure time together. Permanence also preserves, through continuity of place and the memories that inhabit a place, the link between ancestors and posterity. In short, permanence helps prevent us from devolving into our current situation, where family members are scattered at great distances across a continent, often know each other only vaguely as acquaintances, consider themselves exempt from all claims of duty to one another, and have forgotten their common history.

But why care so much about family bonds? Why not replace them with new friendships chosen along the path of American mobility? Family bonds are indispensable because, unlike friendships, they are *not* chosen. They are given by nature. These *natural* bonds are what Edmund Burke calls, "the germ of public affections." They teach affection and loyalty for others regardless of whether we stand to benefit, and they teach obligation to others regardless of our consent. Both lessons are foundational for any strong society, and neither is easily taught by extra-familial relationships based on consent or contract. Thus, if the lived experience of the family is diminished, society itself falters. In the words of Russell Kirk, "societies in which the family has been enfeebled have been disorderly and servile societies—lacking love, lacking security." Whereas, societies in which the family has been strong have been "possessed of a high degree of both order and freedom." So, helping to preserve the family permanence benefits all of civil society.

Another benefit of permanence is tradition. Tradition is a conduit of wisdom. It allows us to inform our decisions with more knowledge than any individual could fit into his own head, and more experience than any lifetime could afford. Tradition makes the least educated among us knowledgeable, and the least experienced among us prudent. We would be foolish to cast it aside. Instead, we should heed the warning of Edmund Burke, in his [Reflections on the Revolutions in France](#):

We are afraid to put men to live and trade on their own private stock of reason because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.

But how do we cultivate tradition? The first requirement is to experience both the past and the future as if they were the present. T.S. Eliot, in [Tradition and the Individual Talent](#), explains how this “historical sense” works:

...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.

What Eliot says is true not only of writers, but of people in general. The historical sense makes us traditional. It brings the wisdom of other generations to bear on the present. And so it guides our lives.

Staying local helps to foster the historical sense. The past

remains present in the person of your parents and grandparents. It can be found in the house where you grew up, and the house where your father grew up. It is etched into the tombstones of your relatives. It hangs in the paintings of the church where your grandfather was baptized. The past remains all around you in the town where you were born. This presence of the past allows you to raise your children in an atmosphere of, what Kirk calls, "diffused gratitude—of sympathy for the hopes and achievements of [your] ancestors." It allows you to pass on to your descendants more directly and effortlessly the loves, loyalties, and knowledge that you have inherited from previous generations. The alternative, Kirk warns, is perilous. In a world in which every generation moves away from its hometown, its ancestors, and even its living family members, we risk becoming mere "flies of a summer, unable to link with dead generations or those yet unborn, lacking memories or high hope." Severed from home, family, and history, we risk joining the ranks of those who "live only for themselves, ignoring the debt they owe to the past and the responsibility they owe to the future."

Another benefit—closely related to tradition—is conservation. In order for Americans to protect land and architectural inheritance, they must be more than owners. They must be trustees. According to conservative philosopher, Professor Roger Scruton, the "trustee is the one who recognizes that his home, and all that it means, are inherited things, things to be safeguarded and passed on." This attitude, he claims, "exercises itself on the local level" because it derives from local loyalty to ancestors and descendants. We have a duty to preserve our land and our town because it belongs not merely to us but to our fathers and grandfathers who have lived here before us, and to our children and grandchildren who will live here after us. This loyalty prevents irresponsibility:

Respect for the dead forbids the arbitrary use of bequests, and compels the trustees to further the purposes which the

founders and donors would approve. By honouring the dead, the living trustees are safeguarding the interests of their successors.

Local trusteeship becomes especially important where religious inheritance is great. In cities such as New Orleans, St. Louis, and Milwaukee, early Catholic immigrants left us countless beautiful churches that now stand—and often barely stand—decaying. The grandchildren of the immigrant builders moved away. The churches were not passed down, but abandoned, with no one to care about them, or even remember them. And now they are lost.

A final benefit of permanence is the enrichment of culture. According to Eliot, “Ideally, each village, and of course more visibly the larger towns, should have each its particular character.” Eliot favors differences in local character not because diversity is an absolute value, but because it is of “vital importance for a society [to have] *friction* between its parts” and differences bring friction. The cities of a nation should all compete and oppose each other in small ways in order to invigorate the nation as a whole. A nation too united is a menace to itself and to other nations. Eliot uses fascism as an example: “In Italy and in Germany we have seen that a unity with politico-economic aims, imposed violently and too rapidly, had unfortunate effects upon both nations.”

Now some would claim that migration between cities is good because it brings the diversity, and the healthy friction, that Eliot wants. On this view, a neighborhood is better for having one resident who was born in Austin, one who was born in Camden, another who was born in small town Wyoming, etc. But this sort of diversity would not satisfy Eliot. As we migrate from town to town we eventually lose our identity as citizens of any town in particular. We lose our local culture and are swept into a homogenous mass culture in which everyone listens to the same music, watches the same TV shows, and has

the same education. Everyone becomes equally severed from family, ancestry, local loyalty, and local traditions—severed, in other words, from everything that could set him apart from other vagabond members of the mass culture. Eliot anticipated all of this. He warned his contemporaries that they were “[making] ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans.” Today his warning is nearly fulfilled. If we want to preserve the remnants of true diversity and cultural friction that Eliot extols, we must preserve local identity. Milwaukee must remain characteristically Milwaukee, Saint Louis, Saint Louis, and New Orleans, New Orleans. Diversity and friction require the residents of a town—or at least very many of them—to stay local, so they can pass on the traditions and character that make the town distinct.

The benefits of permanence, therefore, are considerable: family, tradition, conservation, and diversity of local culture. Yet Americans are quick to abandon permanence. Sometimes, admittedly, we have no choice. Sometimes mobility is necessary. But how often is moving away from our hometown simply a result of confused priorities? Many Americans move for the sake of [more pleasant weather](#). Many others move for the sake of a [more urban lifestyle](#). In these cases, moving is not the result of necessity. It is the result of subordinating permanence to lesser goods. In other cases, moving *seems* necessary but is not. Consider the example of moving for a job. College-educated Americans usually choose a career before choosing a place of residence, and then they allow their chosen career to determine where they “must” move. But we can reverse this order. We can choose where to live first (namely, our hometown), and then allow our chosen town to determine our career. If we do this, moving for work is *much* less likely to be forced upon us. So the apparent necessity of moving for work is really, in many cases, just a choice of priorities. If we cherish permanence enough, we can keep it. We simply have to make a sacrifice. We might sacrifice a desired career. We

might sacrifice urban lifestyle. We might even sacrifice our favorite weather. But we Americans should stop to consider: perhaps permanence—the guardian of family, tradition, practical wisdom, environment, and culture—is *worth it*.

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