

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A Search for America

Robert Wolf

I.

I am a writer, but I am also the executive director of Free River Press, a small non-profit publishing house. As director, I travel the country, getting people without literary ambition, from all walks of life, into writing workshops to document various aspects of their lives, their towns, their regions. I have been doing this for eighteen years.

Many strands of my previous life came together when I went to Nashville with Bonnie, my wife, on January 1, 1989. Going back to the late 1970s and early 1980s I had been a college instructor in composition, literature, and philosophy in Chicago colleges. At the same time I was writing plays for Chicago theaters. I was developing both as a writer and as a teacher of writing. Through a series of experiments that attempted to solve the problem of getting non-writers to want to write, and to write effectively, I developed a number of strategies that made it possible for me later to engage farmers, commercial fishermen, former school teachers, engineers, and a multitude of other working men and women in memoir writing.

I learned that the more pre-writing exercises you have before actually writing, the more the student is likely to write and to write fluently. I also learned that a student-centered classroom is more effective than a teacher-centered one. Putting these two together I began having each student tell the class what he or she was going to write and to have the others ask the writer what they wanted to know more about. This meant that the students were not writing just for me, but for everyone in the room. This also helped take the formality out of composition and make it more conversational in tone. Another important element that I learned was to write as quickly as you could, without worrying about punctuation, grammar, or spelling. I had other exercises geared to teaching specific aspects of effective writing, but these were the main tools that I later brought to my work with adults.

While I was prepared technically to conduct community classes, I had no idea of the impact that writer-centered workshops would have on participants. During my first few years of conducting workshops, first with the homeless and then with farmers, I saw that bringing people together to share personal narratives allows

participants—by sharing histories and common experiences, and by helping one another clarify their narratives—to experience community.

2.

When Bonnie and I moved to Nashville less than a month after our marriage in December 1988, I had no idea how I was going to earn a living. Many years earlier I had taught adult education in rural Michigan and loved it. I decided that that was what I wanted to do and called the Nashville Board of Education. I spoke with a very receptive woman who explained that the only openings for G.E.D. instructors were two classes for the homeless. Would I want those? Yes.

Of the two assignments, the important one was at MATTHEW 25, a homeless shelter for men in downtown Nashville. While I was supposed to be teaching G.E.D. subjects, the woman who hired me said that most of the men now staying at the shelter had their G.E.D.s, or their high school diplomas or college degrees. Don't worry about that, she said, just improvise.

Improvise I did. I would go to the shelter in the afternoons and sit in the common room, drinking coffee and talking with the men, mostly about how they became homeless. Usually just one man was present. Most were willing to tell their stories. Since I had taught writing for years, I would ask the man if he would write his story. One by one, and then in twos and threes, I collected a small group of writers. Since they worked different hours, I might not see all of them at the same time. I might sit one or two hours with just one or two men, and they might strain to write one or two paragraphs. But I persevered.

Eventually a group of four to six men met with me every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. They were intent on letting the world know how they had ended up on the streets. Because the homeless experience is so dehumanizing, so excruciating, many believed they were fated to be homeless. More than one man told me that he thought God wanted him on the streets so he could tell the rest of the country what many thousands of Americans were experiencing. I think they believed this because homelessness, without a sense of purpose, would be too unbearable.

Many of the homeless had arrived in Nashville determined to make it in country music. They came with a small supply of money, a drug or drinking problem, and lots of illusions. Not one of the song writers or guitar strummers at MATTHEW 25 could have earned a living as a street musician, let alone have appeared at the Grand Ole Opry. But it was a heady time. MATTHEW 25 was on Broadway at the end of the honky-tonk district. These were colorful dives where you drank beer or whiskey or boiler makers and listened without cover charge to bands that were playing for tips, hoping a record producer would drop by, hear you,

and sign you to a contract. Some of the bands were quite good. Some were led by men who had played with name stars but now were on their way down. The homeless men worked day labor jobs for minimum wage and spent their days' earnings in the honky tonks. Many of my writers frequented them. So did I.

The workshop opened in early January and after four or five months of writing, by April or May I was ready to present the homeless writers to the city. Their writings were good enough for me to approach a local eatery and pub about an evening of homeless poetry, prose, and music. The owner agreed to a performance and I rounded up the best of the writers along with one homeless and several professional musicians to create an evening's entertainment.

Homelessness was then a hot topic in the mainstream media. My wife was impressed with the work and called her friend, Neenah Ellis, a reporter and producer for National Public Radio, and told her that there was something here worth a story. Neenah asked her to read a sample over the phone, Bonnie did and Neenah arrived from Washington, DC, spent three days with us, interviewing the writers and me and taping the reading. The restaurant was jammed with extra chairs and people standing everywhere, even on the stairs to the balcony. The reading was electric. Neenah's story aired a few months later on "All Things Considered."

The writers were a varied and colorful group. Lori Lee, aka Rebel Yell, was a tall gaunt woman who wore plaid shirts and carried all her worldly possessions in a backpack. She wrote incessantly in a syntactically broken style that was reminiscent of Beat poetry but was due no doubt to some brain dysfunction. Rebel hitchhiked all over the country, swore like a sailor, and was as tough as any man on the street. She was a loner. She came to the workshop only on rare occasions but her work was so interesting that I considered her part of the core group.

Keith McMahon had strange, incomprehensible theories about cosmic this and that and drew diagrams of various inventions that would perform all sorts of wonders. His buddy, Tony, had a master's in zoology and an insider's knowledge of various conspiracies that he would only hint at, saying, "You know what I mean."

By this time the group also included Jim Mince, a jovial alcoholic Texan in his fifties who was helping put on a new roof at the Ryman Auditorium, former home of the Grand Ole Opry. Jim was prone to sticking up for the underdog, which landed him in frequent fights with bartenders and police. He had taught himself to read and write by using the King James Bible. Being an autodidact, he spelled his words phonetically, just as he pronounced them in his Texas twang.

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Another regular was Wayne Leonard, a short, spirited young man who always wore a Confederate Army cap. Wayne had overcome his alcohol problem and worked hard at his writing. He was a good man to have around.

Other performers that evening included Josef Goller, a naturalized American, born in Austria, who had landed in the California prison system for dealing drugs. Now he was a counselor at MATTHEW 25. He refused to be a part of the workshop and so, to get me off his back, handed me a manuscript of poems he had written while in prison. He was more concerned with his songs and lyrics, which I wasn't enthusiastic about. I did later publish a chapbook of his often powerful verse.

The success of the reading brought us more writers. One of these was Robert Roberg, who introduced himself after reading an article on the workshop. Robert explained that he and his family had been homeless in Nashville, but now he was a Mennonite street preacher on lower Broadway where he proclaimed the gospel and hell fire to the homeless and anyone else who would listen.

Robert was a self-taught artist who illustrated his exhortations with day glow paintings. A few years later he was to become a nationally known outsider artist. Robert joined the group about the time I decided that to strengthen it, both in terms of writing skills and life experiences, I needed some non-homeless. I invited Meredith Ludwig, a neighbor in our apartment complex, to join. Meredith was a lively woman in her thirties who was writing and producing radio scripts for Pacifica Radio.

There were a few semi-regulars, but Robert and Meredith, along with Wayne and Jim, formed the core, until the day Jim brought along two women he had met at a McDonalds. They were living at the home of an elderly charitable couple. One of the women, Elizabeth Gilbert, was in her sixties, a former executive secretary for John Hammond, the famed jazz and blues impresario and record producer. When Hammond retired, El (as she called herself) had tried to find a similar position in New York but couldn't. She then came to Nashville looking for work and ended up on the streets.

This was the most exciting time for the workshop. For one, Meredith told me that it was the only community she had experienced in her three years in Nashville. For another, we were getting regular press—print, radio, and television—and that brought us to the attention of Steven Meinbresse, the coordinator for homeless services for the State of Tennessee. Steven admired the project and arranged for the writers to give public readings across the state to educate citizens on the nature of homelessness.

With the success of the readings Bonnie told me I should publish the writings. “Give the homeless a voice!” she urged. I told Steve that I wanted to create a non-profit press for the sole purpose of publishing homeless writings. Steve found a lawyer who donated his services and within a year, Free River Press was a 501(c)(3) corporation. At the same time, MATTHEW 25 wanted me to edit an anthology of writings from the shelter and provided the printing costs. The resulting volume was *Passing Thru* (Wolf, 1990). Tipper Gore, who had heard us read at one function, persuaded the Junior League of Nashville to fund another volume, *Five Street Poets* (Wolf, 1990). We were on our way.

3.

During the first year with the homeless, it became clear that homelessness was a drug and alcohol problem. But why did so many turn to drugs and alcohol to cope? I had, for a long time, realized that our society had no shared, adequate idea of what it means to be a human being. As playwright Robert Bolt wrote in the introduction to his play, *A Man for All Seasons* (1962), past cultures had ideal types to which men and women could aspire: the sage, the saint, the knight, the rational gentleman. But we have only the Consumer, the Bundle of Habits, the Naked Ape, hardly ideas upon which to build a civilization. Consequently, we create institutions—schools, colleges, workplaces, and in some cases religious institutions—that are deforming us. That is the root of the problem.

With that in mind I approached the Tennessee Humanities Council to obtain funding for a thirty-nine week great books seminar that would mix the homeless with the non-homeless, specifically those without power with those who had it. We would study texts from three cultures that had ideal types. We would study thirteen weeks of Confucian classics, thirteen weeks of Greek writings, and thirteen weeks of medieval European texts. The seminar would be run in the Socratic model. Its goal was twofold: first, to train at least one homeless man or woman in argumentation and to give that person an arsenal of texts to back his or her arguments. Second, to let the people of power know that homelessness was a systemic issue and thereby encourage some legislative or other effort on their behalf.

There were two meetings: one at noon and one at night. The evening session was better attended and had a wide collection of people, from a man living in a handmade shack he had built along the Cumberland River to those who lived in shelters or slept in church basements to a Hollywood film producer, a professional photographer, a psychologist, two Vanderbilt University professors, a state senator, and more. The conversations were often contentious and sparked flashes of thunder and lightning. At one noon session, the brightest and most articulate of the homeless drove off a banker with a series of lightning attacks.

What he said was true. This homeless man, Karl Smithson, later became the visible spokesman and public gadfly for the homeless that I was looking for.

I believe in the importance of such study groups, and was told by one of the Vanderbilt University professors that what I had dreamed up was identical the Study Circles movement.¹ Dave Webb, a minister who regularly attended the Nashville seminar, said that I had created a kind of church. After that first year I proposed a second series of seminars, with different texts, which was again funded by Tennessee Humanities. But Bonnie and I already had bought a home in rural Iowa, so I hired one of the first year's participants to lead it.

Two years later I ran a Confucian seminar in Gays Mills, Wisconsin, a small rural enclave of farmers and anarchist back-to-the-landers, funded by the Wisconsin Humanities Council. About thirteen people from the alternative community came regularly. They were engaged, but what effect, if any, it may have had I don't know. At some point in the future I intend to restart a community study group, for I believe they can be as important a tool for community and individual self-study as the writing workshops.

4.

Before Bonnie and I ever moved to Iowa, I realized that no publishing house could possibly sustain itself on homeless writings. With my life-long preoccupation with America, I realized that what I could do was create a series of anthologies from across America written by farmers, doctors, lawyers, secretaries, corporate executives, auto mechanics, and so on. Once we bought a home in Iowa, I decided I would gather a number of farm families into a writing workshop. In my conversations with our neighbors, I learned that the rural crisis was not over. The purpose of the workshop, then, would be to give farmers the opportunity to tell urban Americans what was happening in farm country.

It took about six months before a workshop materialized. Bruce Carlson, a local dentist who had a strong interest in local foods and sustainable agriculture, suggested that I contact Bill Welsh, an organic farmer. Soon after, I read that the Welshes were hosting a farm tour. I went and trudged with the group of largely conventional farmers around various parts of the Welsh farm as Bill and his son Greg explained each part of the operation. Bob Leppert, a close neighbor of ours was there, and as we walked about I explained to him what I had in mind. Bob was interested.

When the tour ended I spoke with Greg, the only organic specialist on the Iowa State University extension staff. He, too, was interested and convinced his father that they should participate. A day or so later I visited with Bob Leppert,

sitting late into the night discussing the ongoing farm crisis and domestic affairs generally. It was an inspiring evening, and Bob said he would help recruit. The Welshes and the Lepperts and I met and drew up a list of possible participants. It took a few months to recruit additional writers because we had to wait until harvest was over. From November through early spring, after fall plowing until spring planting, we met every Monday night around the Welshes' dining room table. We met at 7:00 each night, told stories, wrote, read them back to one another, discussed the ideas and narratives, and then, about ten o'clock, would put the writing aside and Esther Welsh would bring out a platter of food and we would sit until eleven or twelve o'clock, talking neighborhood news or farm business. These evenings were a tremendously important part of my farm education.

Those who participated very much wanted to tell urban Americans what was transpiring in the hinterlands and the eventual price everyone might pay for a farm economy dictated by multinationals that were driving the small farmer out of business. We all believed, as Jefferson did, that the family farm was a cornerstone of American democracy (Jefferson, 1994). Once everything becomes denatured, once the artificial is accepted as natural, then something essential disappears from human life, and humanity loses, perhaps, its humanity.

What more than one person mentioned was that these workshops provided them with community. As Barb Leppert wrote, something had disappeared with the coming of machinery. In the days before diesel, when farmers relied upon horses, work ended at sundown or earlier, and neighbors would gather in the evening to play cards and pop corn. But with the coming of tractors came long days and nights in the fields. Neighborhood visits ceased, community declined, then disappeared.

The workshop continued into a second year, with the addition of Dave and Barb Mitchell. Hitherto only Bill Welsh had shared a painful story, but one that ended happily. I needed drama to engage urban audiences and had gotten, at best, the drama of man versus nature, or farmer versus chemical poisons. This, I discovered, was because rural Midwest culture did not encourage emotional exposure, but the reverse. In fact, it was this very stoicism that had prolonged the farm crisis. A crisis of debt had been caused by the over-expansion of the farm economy. When the crash came, and farmers began to feel the crunch, each suffered in silence, for the ethos demanded this. Thus each failing farmer, unaware of what his neighbors were experiencing, felt that he alone had failed.

When Dave Mitchell told us he was going to sell his machinery, I asked him to keep a journal and that I would publish it. He did, and the resulting diary was one of the most moving pieces in our third book, *More Voices from the Land* (Wolf,

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1992). In it, David wrote that the writing workshop had given him the strength to endure the experience.

Our first book, *Voices from the Land* (Wolf, 1992), was a small sixty-five page volume with a trim size about half that of a normal paperback. Since Free River Press had no money, I had the book printed and bound on the conviction that I could pay costs within thirty days of publication. I reduced cost by having the writers at our house for a collating party. I laid out stacks of odd numbered pages around the dining room table. All of us formed a line and began picking up one page from each stack until we each had the guts of a book in our hand. This went on for at least an hour until all 500 copies were collated. Talk about community effort, this was it. The last writer to leave was Bruce Carlson, and as he stood in the dining room doorway, he said, "I don't think this will go anywhere" and I said, "Bruce, you're wrong."

I was right. At the suggestion of our friend at NPR in Washington, I contacted a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio who created a very effective piece that aired on NPR's "Morning Edition." Minutes after the story aired, the phone began ringing and rang incessantly for three days, with orders coming in from almost every one of the forty-eight contiguous states. I soon ordered a reprint, this time of 1,000 copies. Then the Associated Press did a story that ran in virtually every major daily in the country, except The Wall Street Journal. A flood of letters and checks followed. We did a third printing, which also sold out.

During the workshop's second winter, Free River Press published a memoir by the group's oldest writer, Clara Leppert. Her book, *Simple Times* (1993), also went through three printings of a thousand each. During the third winter we met only long enough to complete *More Voices from the Land* (Wolf, 1994), which also had three printings. All of which was not bad for a grassroots, homegrown effort.

By the time the third book appeared, I was approached by Mike Finnegan of Clermont, Iowa, who saw the usefulness that such a project might have for a small rural town. He asked if I would conduct a workshop in Clermont. Without thinking much about it, I said I would and could handle up to twenty people in a workshop. I also said it could be done in three days, from nine in the morning to four or four-thirty in the afternoon. It turned out to be a good guess. Within a week or so, two business people in Independence, Iowa, decided to host a workshop. I used the same formula there.

Two years later, in 1995, I decided to create a regional portrait, and combined the three farm books with ample excerpts from the two small town books, along with an essay I had written in defense of agrarianism and an interview I had

with an activist priest from Dubuque, Fr. Norm White. Bonnie gave the book its title, *Heartland Portrait* (Wolf, 1995), and I felt that this 150-page volume stood proxy for the rest of the Midwest. I printed 2,000 copies. Just before its publication “CBS Sunday Morning” did a feature on the Iowa workshops, with footage of the farmers and town residents reading from the front porch of our farmhouse.

Four years later, in 1999, Oxford University Press issued an anthology of Free River Press writings. By then I had published a collection of stories from the Amana Colonies² and a farming memoir from rural western Tennessee. In addition, I had other, unpublished stories from the Mississippi Delta, including ones from Helena, Arkansas. Selections from all were included in the Oxford anthology, as well as writings by the homeless and rural Midwesterners. It was called *An American Mosaic: Prose and Poetry by Everyday Folk* (1999). I thought of it as a literary mural, a verbal equivalent of Thomas Hart Benton’s famous nine-panel American panorama, *America Today*.

5.

After a few months of living in northeast Iowa, I recognized the area’s poverty and that of the adjacent areas in Minnesota and Wisconsin. I began to think of tools whereby a community could develop a stronger sense of self while analyzing its strengths and weaknesses and reflecting on ways in which it might become more self-reliant. Naively perhaps, not yet acquainted with the limitations of rural villages, I wrote a paper I called “The Rural Renovation Proposal” (Wolf, 1992). In essence, it proposed that writing workshops and study groups become permanent fixtures in towns. The writing workshops would provide community self-portraits—illustrating in story form the town’s strengths and weaknesses—while the seminars would provide a more analytic base for rejuvenating village life. Seminar readings would range from texts by and about axial thinkers to pamphlets on experiments in economic self-reliance undertaken across the world. I was unaware of the resistance new ideas would meet with when they collided with rural conservatism.

In any event, the paper was circulated only among friends and had no impact. Still, it was the start of my community development thinking. For the next several years I listened to people in the area who would tell me about this or that example of local self-reliance. In the back of my mind was former Senator Warren Rudman’s warning from the early 1990s, that unless the United States eradicated its large deficit it would become “the world’s largest banana republic.” I began considering how large an area it would take to create enough self-sufficiency to avoid the trauma of another Great Depression. I began to think of how to create a regional consciousness and how to define a region.

The upshot was that without having read any of the regionalist documents of the 1930s or the more recent works on bioregionalism, I began to recreate some of their ideas. One was the concept of the bioregion. Because northeast Iowa shared a topography of hills and valleys with southeast Minnesota and southwest Wisconsin and northwest Illinois, I thought this topography might be the unifying glue to create a regional identity. I learned it has a name: the Driftless region.

I had two ideas. The first was to create a survey of the entire Driftless region that would help to create a regional consciousness. The second was to find a way to design and build the tools needed to create a far more self-sufficient rural economy. From my days as a Chicago journalist, I knew a designer named Charles Owen, a professor at the Institute of Design whose design methodology had enabled his students to win numerous international awards for their projects. I reasoned that if Charles' method could design a floating airport, a house of the future, or a vacuum cleaner that it could be harnessed to design an economy. The procedure I outlined was: first, on a grassroots level, create a survey of assets and needs. Next, put the method in the hands of everyday residents of the Driftless region, under the direction of graduate design students, and let the residents design the tools needed for a more self-sufficient economy and a more vibrant culture.

I persuaded area banks to pay for Charles' plane ticket. He came to Lansing, Iowa, and gave a talk on his method to Wisconsin anarchist back-to-the-landers, and to Iowa bankers, retailers, and farmers. The anarchists didn't like anyone strongly suggesting what they could do, and the bankers from one Iowa town said they might be able to work with such-and-such a town but not this other. In short, no one wanted to work with anyone else.

I realized that before a survey of the entire Driftless region could be produced, it would be necessary to break the survey into smaller pieces, and once all were published, unite them in one large tabloid. I began with a four-county subregion in northeast Iowa and got the backing of three area colleges for the project. I wanted a tabloid book because I wanted to display lots of photographs side by side.

The book, *The Northeast Iowa Book* (Wolf, 1997), was divided in three parts: the first was a photo essay of the four counties taken by high school students under the direction of a professional. I chose students because I had heard that if you can get youngsters involved in community development it becomes easier to get the adults involved. The second part of the book consisted of a series of short articles beginning with area geology, going on to soil formation, flora and fauna, and the histories of the different functions of the economy and culture. These were written by students and adults in workshops. The third and final section

was a survey of area assets and needs based upon discussions I had with various groups. Farmers discussed agriculture, retailers the condition of Main Street, college the role of church in northeast Iowa life. And so on.

We printed and gave away 5,000 copies but because I was so exhausted by the effort, and because the colleges did not understand the need for public information on the book's purposes, development work did not follow. But now, almost a decade later, the condition of our country calls for a deep and serious reconsideration of regionalism. As of this writing, I am discussing with the colleges the need to update the book and to follow publication with an extensive public information campaign.

Since the publication of *An American Mosaic* (Wolf, 1999), I continue working in many parts of the country, often traveling into backroads communities, searching out people who retain the regional characteristics of people sixty or more years ago. In fact, it was one trip into Texas that led me to an old-time cowboy, Clyde Shepherd, now deceased. Knowing Clyde made me realize that America was not as fully homogenized as I thought. The old folkways are dying out everywhere, no question, but my continuing encounter with them and the people of the older America help revivify my vision of what, someday, may be recreated in some small parts of this country.

Notes

1. Study circles are regularized group meetings of 8 to 10 people who meet over a specified period of time and explore a specific public issue. The intent of the group is to create a safe forum for sharing an exchange of ideas, to encourage debate, and find common ground. If hundreds of study circles are functioning simultaneously and exploring the same issue in community-wide programs, a greater possibility exists for empowering and mobilizing a community to resolve conflicts and problems. Study circles have been very successful, growing into a full-fledged movement, in great measure through the promotion of the Topsfield Foundation which helps to support the Study Circles Resource Center, founded in 1992. The first community-wide effort guided by the Center was carried out in Lima, Ohio, in 1992 to assist in resolving racial tensions which were a result of the Rodney King Verdicts. You can find more about the Study Circles Resource Center at <http://www.studycircles.org/en/index.aspx> (Klein, 2000).

2. The Amana Colonies, located in east central Iowa, are a cluster of seven villages established in 1842 by German immigrants, members of a Protestant sect that emerged during the Inspirationist movement. For over seventy years the Colonies operated as a religious and communal society with successful farming

and manufacturing operations. When the church ceased governing the Colonies, the Amana Society continued operating communally until June 1, 1932.

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Biography

Robert Wolf is a writer and director of Free River Press, a nonprofit education corporation. The focus of his work is on community and regional development in rural America. He is a former columnist and feature writer for the *Chicago Tribune*. His books include: *The Triumph of Technique: The Industrialization of Agriculture and the Destruction of Rural America* (Ruskin Press); *An American Mosaic: Prose and Poetry by Everyday Folk* (Oxford); and *Jump Start: How to Write from Everyday Life* (Oxford). These books and Free River Press titles may be ordered at the Free River Press web site: www.freeriverpress.org.