

Where do our values lie?

"Well I was born in a small town
And I can breathe in a small town
Gonna die in this small town
And that's prob'ly where they'll bury me."

—John Cougar Mellencamp
"Small Town" (1985)

People facing economic depressions, natural catastrophes, epidemics or wars may question what civilization means, where true values are to be located, who defines them and how secure they are. We have been doing this ourselves after being battered by Katrina, Rita, our financial meltdown, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Virtually all the Great-Depression-generation sources in the late Studs Terkel's award-winning oral history of World War II, *The Good War*; question our cultural values. British socialist thinkers like George Orwell and Cyril Connolly did, too, after seeing what was done to their world in the nineteen-thirties and -forties.

Orwell's bleak vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is now standard high school, or even middle school, reading, as I know from the books our eighth-grade son has brought home this year. But strong criticisms in major cultural works like Orwell's novel have less impact on us if we meet them when our minds and hearts are too inexperienced to grasp their full implications.

Only when we have come to know the limits of our own courage

and have measured our own capacity to love, can we understand the full horror of Winston Smith's torture-induced words, "Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia!" Only when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an assortment of faintly remembered mythical archetypes does the whole concept of Osama bin Laden begin to make us uneasy. Is he alive? Is he dead? Does it matter? Our unending war on terror needs an undying bogeyman. Bin Laden is our Goldstein.

Connolly's collection of reflections and quotations *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* (1944) is now all but forgotten, but it is worth reading, as I did on recent plane flights to and from London while thinking about this column. Connolly claims that "civilization is maintained by a very few people in a small number of places and we need only some bombs and a few prisons to blot it out altogether." "Few" and "small" are relative terms, but his observation is well worth considering given the attention paid in our recent election campaign to questions about who is American and who is un-American and where our true American values lie. *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* made fun of the answer that they are found in small-town America, but this is a very strong myth that most of us, including me, want to believe. Why else would political strategists make so much of it?

Sarah Palin stressed the small


town values that John Cougar Mellencamp enshrined in his pop hymn "Small Town." The flip side of the McCain-Palin message was to brand as negative and "elitist" big-city intellectual thoughts and ideas, the Sodom-and-Gomorrah morality of New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the political corruption of Washington, DC.

Who among us does not respond to such preaching somewhere deep inside? Hearing it made me reread the unexpurgated edition of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Sinclair made Chicago at the turn of the twentieth-century the archetypical corrupt metropolis

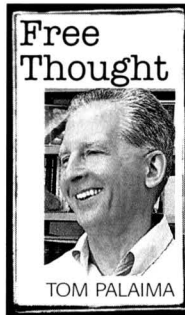
where entire families of innocent immigrants are exploited and ruined. It has added poignancy for me because the central family in *The Jungle* is Lithuanian, like my own immigrant grandparents who worked in Cleveland's steel mills at that same time. Sinclair describes sickening abuses in the food and medicine industries and dehumanizing working conditions for men, women and underage children. President Theodore Roosevelt followed up on Sinclair's exposé. Our federal government instituted regulations that led to the Food and Drug Administration. The lesson here is that big cities are places where innocents cannot survive, ironically for the McCain-Palin message, without big government protections.

But the *Little House on the Prairie* notion that small towns are places of goodness and peace and frontiers, like Alaska, are places of straightforward honesty that reward manly courage, doesn't hold up. We don't have to look outside the state of Texas. Just read the extracts from local histories and county courthouse documents in John Graves' *Goodbye to a River*. The people who settled in small towns along the Brazos were a "yeomanry...driven from older states by poor-white desperation and a hot resolve not to take no crap from nobody nowheres no more." They were "cattle kings and horse thieves and half-breeds and whole sons of bitches and preachers in droves and sinners in swarms....Law and order in other words were fairly faint ideals."

Larry McMurtry tells us in *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* that most Texans out in the country "live and die in woeful ignorance." McMurtry's son James imagined wanting to escape this fate in his 1995 song "Levelland," about the kind of small town nothingness that made his father say, "I would have traded a lot of sunsets for a few good books."

I'll trade one sunset for Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears A Who*. "A person's a person, no matter how small" his town or how big his city. And last time I looked, we were all Americans. 

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Malcolm Gladwell

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