

Mr. Vance's Hillbilly Elegy and Mine

In the summer of 2010 I took a writing seminar at the Pacific School of Religion. The focus was on memoir writing and spiritual autobiography. It was led by a wonderful woman named Pat Schneider who founded a writing school called The Amherst (as in Massachusetts) Writers and Artists. The seminar made such an impact on me that I went back for more two summers later, again with Ms. Schneider.

What came out of all that was an ongoing writing project of mine—with the latest version just completed—called *Mockin' Bird Hill*. *Mockin' Bird Hill* is the name I gave, at the age of five, to a small farm my grandfather owned just outside the Ohio River town of Gallipolis, Ohio; and somehow it stuck. I took the name from the title of a song by the singing duo of Les Paul and Mary Ford. Patti Page also had a hit single with it. *Mockin' Bird Hill* played a lot on the radio at that little farm where I spent all of my summers until my early teens with my grandfather as well as an aunt and two uncles—the three of whom were siblings.

Gallipolis is about 40 or 50 miles from the West Virginia town where I grew up. It was founded by French settlers right around the time of the American Revolution, hence the Latin-based name “Galli—polis” which means French Town.

Much of the writing I did at those seminars was about *Mockin' Bird Hill* and my childhood memories of it. I later expanded the memoir to cover the time up through my college years at Marshall University, after which I left the State of West Virginia to spend my life in various locales before settling in here in New England. Writing *Mockin' Bird Hill* has served to remind me, however, of all that I really didn't leave behind after college, wherever my journey since then has taken me.

So, when J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* came out about a year ago, I couldn't help but read it in comparison and contrast to this elegy of my own. Mr. Vance is the same age as my son, which puts me in the generation just before his. He and I came out of essentially the same cultural milieu, a generation apart.

There are all kinds of places I could go with this topic, and I know I have to keep in within some reasonable bounds today. So I'll first share a little of Mr. Vance's

story and note how it compares and contrasts to mine. Then I want to shift the focus to the subtitle of *Hillbilly Elegy* which is “A memoir of a family and culture in crisis.” It is that “culture in crisis,” which I feel Mr. Vance accurately identifies, that played a role in the outcome of our most recent Presidential election.

I really wish I had time to give you the full flavor of this book. You’ll have to read it yourself to get that. I’ll just do a few comparisons and contrasts between Vance’s story and mine. We both actually grew up in middle-class communities, but our family ties go back into rural Appalachia. For JD it was Middletown, Ohio which is little ways south of Dayton. For me it was St. Albans, West Virginia, which is in one of the few sort-of urban areas of that State just a few miles from the capital of Charleston. The wider area is known as the Kanawha Valley, so named for the River that runs through it. Armco Steel was the economic mainstay of Middletown, just as Union Carbide, Monsanto, and DuPont were the economic foundations of the Kanawha Valley. In much of the country just south of the Kanawha Valley the economic mainstay was coal—“King Coal” as it is known.

Mr. Vance’s cultural roots are in Eastern Kentucky near the town of Jackson. This is where he spent some of his summers in his early years in a home that revolved around his grandparents. Here he gained much of his early identity as a hillbilly, which he proudly calls himself, as he came to learn much of his family lore.

In a similar way, the relatives I spent my early summers with on Mockin’ Bird Hill came from rural West Virginia in what is called a “holler” before they relocated to Gallipolis. I know the correct term is “hollow”, as in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*; which is a small valley or vale in a rural setting. But where Mr. Vance and I come from it’s called a “holler.”

Mr. Vance had an Uncle Jimmy who had moved out of that setting to California, in the Napa Valley. It was his Uncle Jimmy who first helped open JD’s eyes to the fact that there were other worlds beyond the one in which he was living, when he invited him out for a visit.

For me, it was an Uncle Don who was a high school teacher living near Cincinnati. He was one of the two uncles I spent my summers with since he lived at the Gallipolis house during the school summer vacation. Being a bachelor during the time I was growing up—he married late in life—Uncle Don would invite me over

to his “bachelor pad” near Cincinnati to spend a weekend with him every spring beginning when I was 14, and on up through my college years. We’d go to Cincinnati Reds games, take in movies, eat in nice restaurants, and the like. This Uncle was the one who also introduced me to the world of books and ideas, and gave me my love of learning.

For Mr. Vance and me, college was a way out of the places of our cultural origins. But they are origins neither of us have ever disavowed. We affirm them even as we transcend them. Mr. Vance joined the Marines after high school, and from the financial assistance that gave him, along with some hard work and some scholarship funds, he went to Ohio State University. From there he went on to Yale Law School, and into the career that such a school opens the doors to. As the dust jacket on his book tells it, he is now on the legal team for a Silicon Valley investment firm and lives in San Francisco with his wife, whom he met at Yale Law School. There are some pretty humorous episodes he describes as he brings his Appalachian identity to the rarified atmosphere of Yale University and New Haven.

For me it was a much more modest, and yet in many ways similar, journey. College was affordable enough in the early 1960s that I was able—with just a little financial assistance, and with what little help my parents could offer—work my way through Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. You could actually work much of your way through a State University at that time. I came out of college, believe it or not, debt free. From there I headed north to a fairly prestigious and quite liberal theological seminary in Rochester, New York—and my career has gone from there, to right here.

The major difference in our respective upbringings has to do with our families. For Vance the story of both his immediate and extended family is—forgive me JD—a really crazy one. While his mother was a trained nurse, her nursing career was subverted by her struggles with drugs and alcohol, along with serial marriages to five husbands, some of whom were quite abusive. He had no relationship with his biological father.

The mainstays in Vance’s life, therefore, were his grandparents. They moved from Jackson, Kentucky to Middletown when JD was quite young. Part of their reason for moving was to be near their grandchildren as it became apparent that their

daughter could not sufficiently meet her responsibilities as a mother for JD and his sister.

These grandparents, whom JD calls Mamaw and Papaw were, putting it mildly, characters. They didn't so much leave their Kentucky holler as they brought it to Middletown with them. There are lots of Mamaw and Papaw stories in this book. The only one I'll share has to do with how they threatened to beat up a store clerk who asked their son (JD's Uncle Jimmy as it were) to be more careful when he dropped a toy that was on a shelf. His Papaw's response was to smash the toy to the floor before both grandparents told the clerk just how they were going to work him over. And then, so JD tells it, they went back to conducting their business with the store clerk as if nothing had happened once they'd made their point. That's one of the milder Mamaw and Papaw stories. I won't get into the ones involving shotguns.

My St. Albans and Gallipolis families were, by comparison, rather boring; and very blessedly so. And, just for the record, there were no guns. My father struggled to raise his family as a self-employed house painter while my mother stayed home to raise their four children. We went through a series of rented homes and apartments in Charleston and St. Albans until I was ten when my father somehow managed to scrape enough money together for a down payment on a pre-fab duplex. We rented out one side of it to help make the mortgage payments while my Mom, Dad, three sisters and I squeezed into the other side.

Ours was a very strong religious home—thanks in good measure to my father. Our family's social life largely revolved around a local Baptist church. And while I've moved light years from the very conservative Baptist aura of our home and church, I still have to be grateful for the stability and centeredness it provided our family, especially in the midst of our economic struggles. I still have a clear memory of the time, at age sixteen, that I loaned my parents some money I'd saved back from my paper route so they could buy our weekly groceries. They repaid me soon enough, but that's how tight it got at times.

My gratitude, then, for my rather staid, constricted, but still stable family life in St. Albans was considerably reaffirmed as I read of some of the really scary things that happened to Mr. Vance as he grew up in Middletown. I did not have to deal with the kind of shaky upbringing that he did.

I could devote the rest of this sermon to these comparisons and contrasts, but we've got other places to go. The subtitle, as noted, to *Hillbilly Elegy* is "A memoir of a family and culture in crisis." "Culture in crisis" is where we now turn our attention.

The Soul Matters theme for February is Identity. And that's what this book is really about. It's about identity, which is one of the most basic of our human needs. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the formation of an identity is the one we quickly attend to after taking care of our physical survival and safety. Our identity, as we cultivate it over a life-time, gives us our sense of who we are and how we can most meaningfully relate to the world around us.

It is this fundamental need for a human identity that can also be exploited and manipulated in some very dangerous and destructive ways.

A couple of quick things to note before going on. Thing One: Mr. Vance wrote his book before the last Presidential campaign and election took place; so there are, obviously, no references to any of it. But some of what he writes does provide a foreshadowing. Thing Two: The outcome of our last Presidential election cannot be reduced to any one single factor. What I hope to offer here is but one piece of a larger, and more complex, picture.

One of the things I saw in the last Presidential election was the manipulation and exploitation of the feelings of a lost identity by some of the people Vance writes about. I'll come at this point by sharing a little more of my hillbilly elegy.

When I entered college at the age of 18 my identity included that of a white, male, born again, saved, Baptist Christian with conservative political leanings--undergirded by the safe and secure family ties to which I've alluded.

Well I'm still white and male—albeit with what I hope is an elevated consciousness of what that all means—but other parts of my identity underwent a pretty heavy makeover in the course of those four college years. My first response, in that setting, to any challenges to my identity—and it was hardly an unusual one—was very defensive. To learn that there were other perspectives, other points of view, and other ways of living besides the ones that gave me my

sense of self, were first seen as threats to my identity, to my sense of who I was. My initial response was to fight back, or seek shelter by pulling even tighter into the identity that had gotten me to my early adulthood.

But, for reasons I've never fully grasped all these years later, although I attribute some of it to the Uncle who taught me how to creatively use my mind, I eventually found the wherewithal to listen to those other perspectives, to those other points of views, and other ways of living; and came to see that I could still have a good and viable identity by learning from them. (One quick marker here: I did not even know a person of the Jewish faith until my college freshman year.) I didn't buy into everything I heard or was exposed to, but I did come to see that identity formation is not static—but instead is dynamic and ever-evolving.

I thought of this when I came to a line in Vance's book that gives us our quote for today in the Order of Service: "I learned that the very traits that had enabled my survival during childhood inhibit my success as an adult." I'm taking this passage slightly out of Vance's context for my point here; but I related to those words as they reminded me of the time when I realized that the identity that had served me well up to a certain point in my life no longer would.

Then there was my father—from whom I took some of my initial identity. When I attempted to share with him how my religious, political, social, and cultural world views were being reshaped, and how my identity was evolving because of all that; it was something he was not prepared to deal with. Any questioning or rejecting of his worldview on my part—especially when it came to religion—was seen as my rejecting him and his identity of himself as a human being.

Eventually I had to accept that and live with it, largely on the understanding that I had been given opportunities to work on, and re-mold, my identity in ways that had simply not been available to him. His formal education went to the eighth grade in a couple of one-room school houses—after which he became a hard working young man, and then an increasingly older man, for the rest of his life.

Nothing I've just said should be taken as me thinking I am a better person than my father. I do not. He was one of the most decent and hard-working human beings I've ever known, and I was proud to name my own son after him. But when I think

on his life, and of the cultural setting out of which we both came, it gives me some insights into the events of recent months.

Repeating what I said earlier that the outcome of the Presidential race cannot be reduced to any one single factor, a lot of the appeal that the current President had was to persons who felt their identity slipping away or being diminished—particularly those in the State of West Virginia, southern Ohio, and western Pennsylvania, all of which are in Appalachian country.

Along with all of the economic uncertainties of a post-industrial age, when the Armco plant in Middletown closes and coal is no longer King, comes a sense of fear and hopelessness and alienation. This sense is sometimes then exacerbated by rising levels of alcohol and drug abuse (prescription and illegal). And along with all of that comes the sense that my life doesn't count for much while other lives "out there" somewhere are getting the better end of things.

This fear is often covered up by a kind of false bravado that maintains that there are these "liberal elites" out there somewhere who are responsible for all that is diminishing my life and my identity. There are these other identities somewhere that are dissing mine. While such feelings are understandable up to a point, they also can get in the way of any kind of self-examination by those who have them.

Add in that the higher education I was able to avail myself of now comes with such a load of debt, that the general feeling amongst many of those in this culture in crisis is "why bother." Yes, the opportunities to re-work one's identity are still there, but they are not near as easily available now as they were to me fifty years ago when a college education was much more affordable.

So folks in this identity crisis, or "identity trap" as we could call it, are given the message that if Black lives matter, and Muslim lives matter, and immigrants lives matter, and LGBT lives matter, then yours do not. That is a lie. As I had to learn myself, identity formation is not a zero sum game. The affirmation of other identities does not diminish or demean anyone else's; or at least it shouldn't.

But that is the way it is perceived, or misperceived, by certain of our fellow citizens. When persons in such a life situation, then, hear a campaign slogan like "Make American Great Again," the subliminal message they hear is, "my life is

going to be great again...my identity is going to count for something...somebody is standing up for me.”

Thinking on all this took me back to an early Bob Dylan song: “Only a Pawn in Their Game.” Dylan wrote the song in response to the murder of civil rights worker Medgar Evers in 1963. Beyond that initial context, however, its larger message remains relevant. The song is about the exploitation and manipulation of fear, uncertainty, and poor self-image by certain politicians for their own political gain.

Many of the inhabitants of the “culture in crisis” that Vance identifies were, as I see it, pawns in a cynical game. The threat, the misperceived threat, of the loss or diminishment of their identity was indeed exploited and manipulated. I can only wonder what the outcome might prove to be if and when the realization dawns on those in that culture that they cast their lot with a false prophet whose only concern about anyone’s identity is, by all appearances, no more than that of his own.

So where does all this leave us? I’m pretty well done for today, and can only offer a few closing thoughts. The question we religious liberals need to be exploring is what kind of a vision to we have to offer those in that culture in crisis? They may well not be ready to hear or respond to anything from us now, just as my father was not ready to hear the world view I was coming to, but that doesn’t remove the question from us.

As we do our exploring as to how we may broaden our vision, we’ll continue to stand on the side of love and justice—while being aware that there are parts of our national landscape we’ve yet to reach.

Stay in the struggle, persist in holding fast to that which is good and just, and resist all that diminishes, demeans, or threatens the well-being of anyone’s life; and look to one another to help guide our feet.

Stephen Edington
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