



Brandon O'Brien was raised in the rural South, educated in the suburbs, and is now living and doing ministry in Manhattan. With the knack of a natural storyteller, he shares what he learned about himself, faith, and the people who make up America on his own journey through it.

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A Nice Place to Belong To

“A man belongs to this world before
he begins to ask if it is nice to belong to it.”

—G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*¹

As soon as the temperatures begin to rise and the daylight hours lengthen in the early summer, Dad often picks me up from school and drives me straight to the creek to fish until dark.

It is a short drive north on Highway 71 to the next town and Little Sugar Creek, which winds through the Bella Vista Country Club golf course. Dad drives with the windows down and the radio up. The songs at the top of the charts circa 1990 give me glimpses of life in worlds far away. Elton John sings about a club at the end of the street. Don Henley describes how, “In a New York Minute,” everything can change. Cher sings about turning back time. I, for one, am quite fine with the time I’m in.

Dad parks the truck along the highway near our favorite

fishing hole and hides the keys in the rear bumper. We walk back upstream as far as we want before scrambling down the bank into the water to fish. Then we wade and fish our way downstream in the direction of the truck.

Little Sugar Creek is typical of Northwest Arkansas waterways. It is narrow, in many places just a few feet across and maybe a dozen yards across at the widest. The banks are covered in rocks the size of grapefruits and here and there jut up in high rocky bluffs. The water is clear as glass and home to hungry smallmouth. The smallmouth are why we are here.

In addition to fishing, I have two jobs.

One is catching crawfish to use as bait—small ones about the length of a pinky finger. There's an art to catching crawfish in a creek, if you want to know the truth. They are small and quick and camouflaged to match the creek bed, and they live under stones. To give yourself the best chance of success, you have to stand with your feet downstream of the rock you plan to look under, so that the moving water will carry the sand and dirt you stir up downstream and out of your way. Then you have to move the stone slowly, so the crawfish doesn't startle and bolt. Move the stone. Let the sand settle. Half the time, there's no crawfish under there anyway and you have to start over elsewhere. If there is one there, you approach from behind, slowly, and pin it between forefinger and thumb. Its little pinchers will shoot up in protest or despair, but you've got it.

This job is perfect for the nimble fingers of a child. I am good at it.

My other job is collecting golf balls from the creek bed

that I later clean—a quick bleach bath and a little scrubbing get rid of the algae—and sell to Dad’s coworkers, some for a quarter each and some for fifty cents. By the end of an evening—a good evening—we might be walking back to the truck with a stringer full of smallmouth and pockets bulging with golf balls.

Wading the Little Sugar always feels mildly subversive. We are not allowed to use the golf course; it is a perk reserved for those who own property in the community. We rent. But the Property Owners Association doesn’t own the water. We can wend through the course via the creek bed, a quiet and harmless infiltration into a world from which I sometimes feel excluded. Down here we are hiding in plain sight. The gurgle of the creek obscures any noise from the highway. The high banks shorten our horizons. We are not far from home, but we are long gone.

The game of golf, going on above and around us, is an occasional reminder that we are at least adjacent to civilization. Golf holds no appeal to me. Now and then a golfer shanks a ball into the creek and asks us to find it for him.

“What are you guys doing down there?” they ask. “Fishing?”

They say “you guys” instead of “y’all” because they’re not from around here. Many of the golfers are retired and have moved to Bella Vista from far off places like Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan. They have funny accents and belong to foreign religions like Lutheranism.

“Yessir,” we say. “Fishing.”

“I wish I was doing *that* and you were playing my round of golf.”

I can sell an egg carton of secondhand golf balls for up to \$6 to guys like these, and the upside of making a little money from Yankee transplants or corporate big shots isn't lost on me.

This is how the values of a place are passed from one generation to the next. They are caught in creeks or on city sidewalks or suburban cul-de-sacs. They are transmitted by experience. There wasn't a catechism class or values seminar for young people in my hometown. There were just days like these, filled mostly with mundane things that shaped my perceptions of the good life and what's important and how to attain and secure the things in life that matter. All of us pick these things up as children without testing them or examining them. No one lays out the options and asks us to choose. (That's what college is for.) We just go to the creek with the windows down on a warm day in early summer and the moment implants things in your soul. Later your parents and neighbors and people you love say things that reinforce those lessons you pick up in the air without thinking. And on it goes.

G. K. Chesterton wrote, "A man belongs to this world before he begins to ask if it is nice to belong to it."² He was talking about the cosmos, I suspect, but he could as easily have been talking about the places we grow up. I belonged to rural and small-town Arkansas before I had reason or opportunity to ask if it was nice to belong to it. It's the same for urbanites, too. New Yorkers are brought up believing New York is a nice place to belong to. Same goes for suburbanites, surely.

Different people begin questioning the niceness of their

place of origin at different ages and for different reasons. Good friends of mine were eager to leave our small town before I was. They had considered it not nice before I had given it any thought. Some people never doubt the niceness of their place. In any case, our place makes its mark on us before we are able to question it. We all internalize habits of mind, preferences, and values before we're even conscious that we're from someplace. Once we do, we are shaped forever by either accepting or rejecting the values we grew up with.

This may be obvious, but it's worth coming out and saying. Because most of the time when news outlets and historians and sociologists research and report on the differences between values in urban and rural places, they don't talk about childhood experiences. They don't talk about how the winding, two-lane highway makes you drive slower and how the squish of creek water between your toes shapes your sense of normal and good and right. Instead they compare statistics about crime and education, cross-reference voting patterns and average IQs. They assess media coverage of important events in different regions and analyze Nielsen ratings and median incomes. The most sympathetic treatments at least talk to real people in real places. But even then, they are usually trying to ferret out what a place's values *are*. Rarely do they ask where those values come from or how those values come to take such deep root in the hearts of a local population. An out-of-town researcher would do well to turn off the voice recorder and stand knee-deep in Little Sugar Creek for an afternoon before asking the locals how they feel about climate change and government overreach.

I have my granddaddy's receding hairline and my grandpa's ruddy complexion. I walk with my dad's gait. And when I sing in a group, I instinctively sing the alto part because that's how my grandmother taught me to harmonize during long drives in the car, before I knew enough to resist. Blame nature or nurture. Either way, I came by all those things honestly. More to the point, none of these things would come out in an interview. If you were to sit me down and ask me about my political affiliation and how I feel about the burning issues of the day, no question I know of would get me thinking about hairlines and singing harmony on road trips. No question would get me thinking about Little Sugar Creek. But those are the kinds of things that make the deepest impression.

The point is, we're all from some*place*, and that someplace shapes us before we are aware of it. Place is not genetic in the same way as our complexion or hairline, but it might as well be. Because before we can resist it, our someplace makes its impression. It gets down in our bones and shapes how we move about in the world. Whether you spend the rest of your life committed to living in and defending your place of origin or trying to leave it behind, that place serves forever as the point of reference, the point of departure. It is the thing you are forever trying to reclaim or forever trying to escape.

The gentlemen driving golf balls over our heads while we fished the Little Sugar Creek, these transplants from northern cities like Chicago or Minneapolis or Omaha, moved to Bella Vista for the mild winters and cheap real estate. I didn't know any of that. All I knew was that after spending a whole life somewhere else, they left those northern cities and chose

this place to retire and die in. I might have been too young to ask the question, but it seemed like these people had asked it and answered it: this really was a nice place to belong to.

A Better Place to Belong to Than Others

Which brings up the other side of this issue. At the same time that we are getting to know our home place deeply and intimately by experience, we are forming opinions about other places in a very different way. While I was learning that my place was a nice place to belong to, I was learning that other places—especially northern cities—were dreadful. The old men who golfed above our heads on Little Sugar Creek taught me that. If *our* place wasn't better than wherever they came from, then why did they come all this way to retire? Songs on the radio reinforced the feeling that the coasts were morally degenerate places. Images on the news reinforced the danger inherent in other places. We watched Rodney King beaten by police in Los Angeles from our living room in an all-white world. A few years later I stood in my baseball uniform, late for a game, while police and news crews pursued O. J. Simpson down a Los Angeles freeway. All of this subtly reinforced a clear message that the place I lived in was better than those places: safer, kinder, more Christian.

By the time I was a teenager, I had formed strong opinions about parts of the country I had never visited and people whom I had never met. I knew those people and those places only by hearsay through media of various sorts.

If the statistics can be trusted, this is how most Americans

get their opinions about the *rest* of America. Our main sources of strong opinions about other places are media, whether news outlets, popular music, or television and film. We don't know the places we dislike from up close. We only know them from a distorting distance. If the statistics can be trusted, the average American has visited only ten of our fifty states. That means 80 percent of the country is foreign to most of us. Ten percent of Americans have never traveled outside of the state they live in.³ And while movies portray families from all over the country making long drives or flights to be home for the holidays, half of Americans live within eighteen miles of their mother. Only 20 percent of us live further than two hours' drive away from our parents.⁴ Taken together, this data suggests that Americans actually have very little experience with or exposure to parts of the country and communities unlike the ones they live in.

For most Americans, then, if you want to understand and appreciate the way other people live, it's going to take a concerted effort to do so. It may be as difficult as changing the way you walk or singing the melody when you've been singing harmony all your life. It's worth establishing that point from the beginning. The work this book will ask you to do won't be easy.

The Twenty Percent

Of course there is that twenty percent of folks who live more than two hours from mom, who have experienced a bit more of the world. Some of them leave because they have to. Some leave because they want to. Some people reject the place that

first formed them and spend the rest of their life trying to leave it behind.

Others of us moved for different reasons. I followed a calling. There were never any hard feelings. I never rejected my home place. But I left it. In leaving it, I've received the rare gift of living in a range of places: the small-town and rural South; the suburban Midwest; the urban East Coast. Living different places forced me to question and assess the narratives we have received about other places—and our own places—in the media and our own folklore. For me, this ongoing process has unfolded as a series of confrontations.

The first confrontation came right on the eve of adulthood.

My fiancée (now wife) and I were spending the holiday with my dad and stepmom and the extended O'Brien clan at Dad's relatively new cabin on the banks of the White River in north central Arkansas. The location is about as remote as you can imagine—two miles down a dirt road from the nearest town, which has a population of sixty people. By day, Dad's back porch offers a stunning view of the White River winding through sheer Ozark Mountain bluffs. At night, being miles from the nearest street lamp, Dad's front porch gives access to a stunning view of our galaxy. Flip off the porch light and stand in awe of the dazzling curtain of stars.

That's what I did. Amy and I arrived at the house late. Before we went inside, I stopped her on the porch and said, "You've got to see this." I reached inside and turned off the porch light. Had we not been holding hands, we wouldn't have been able to find each other standing nearby. The darkness was profound.

Amy grew up in an Asian city as an American expatriate. Her childhood was about as urban and first-world as they come. I was eager to introduce her to the charms of country living.

“OK, that’s enough,” she said. “Turn the lights on.”

I was surprised. “But isn’t this view spectacular? Isn’t it *romantic*?”

“Sure. It’s also creeping me out. Let’s go inside.”

“Wait just a second. What’s creepy about it? It’s just you and me and this unbelievable light show.”

“Right,” she said. “Just *you* and *me*. In the middle of nowhere. With no witnesses. What if something terrible happens to us out here? No one would know. There’s a reason all the horror movies happen in places like this.”

“You mean you’d feel safer if there were more people around—more lights and noise and all that—even if the people were strangers?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, if something terrible happens to you out here, maybe no one will know,” I said. “I’ll give you that. But if something terrible happens to you in a city, no one will *care*. I’d rather take my chances in the country.”

“Feel free. I’m going inside.”

This was the first time in our relationship it occurred to me we might not see eye to eye on every issue.

We went inside where everyone was already asleep. She went to bed in the downstairs guest room. I went upstairs and slept on the loft overlooking the living room, troubled by my

fiancée's failure to recognize the commonsensical superiority of rural life.

The next morning, in the gray light of dawn, I was awakened from sleep when I heard my dad say something I had only heard him say when we were hunting doves or ducks or some other sort of bird:

"They're coming in heavy now." He said it from the living room below me. Before I could ask myself why he would say something like that from the living room—*were birds landing on the furniture?*—I got an answer. There was a wall-shaking boom. Someone had fired a gun. In the house.

I sat upright to yell downstairs, "What's going—" Before I could ask the question, another round went off. Below I saw my dad sitting cross-legged on the floor just inside the back door. The door was ajar, just wide enough to accommodate the barrel of a hunting rifle, which Dad still shouldered. He and the stock of the gun were inside; the business end of the barrel was outside.

"Dad! What in the world are you doing?" It was the only reasonable question to ask.

He looked up at me and gave what he considered the only reasonable response: "Well, if I open the door any wider, they fly away."

"Uh huh."

"This way I can just shoot from inside, and they don't fly away."

"Dad. It's 6 a.m."

He looked around him. "It looks like everyone's up."

He was right. A couple rounds of gunfire will have that effect. My grandparents were on the stairs, disheveled, in their nightclothes. Their faces said, *It's early, but this isn't the most surprising thing that could have happened in this place at this hour.* My fiancée (who, it should be noted, was not yet legally bound to this clan) was at the bottom of the stairs in her pajamas, looking at my dad who had just fired a gun in the house at six in the morning on Thanksgiving. When I looked at her looking at us, it was like I saw my family for the first time. The scales fell from my eyes. How did I not see it before now?

This is not normal behavior.

Except that for the previous twenty-something years of my life, it had been. It took me seeing my people and my place through someone else's eyes to make the truth plain. And there was no unseeing the truth once it was revealed.

No one who knows us would characterize my family as "rednecks." Most of my family members are accomplished white-collar professionals of various sorts. We just hunted and fished and ate wild game. We worked hard and earned money so we could vacation in the middle of nowhere. Other branches of my family, my mom's side, had different hobbies but chose a remote lifestyle, too, on the banks of a bayou in Louisiana. These experiences made us different and they shaped me considerably. And now, for the first time in my life, I was seeing what we must look like to outsiders.

Just a few weeks later, Amy and I married and moved to the Chicago suburbs, where I had the chance to become familiar with the kinds of people who moved to my hometown to retire. Relationships there changed the way I viewed

Northern transplants and the cities and suburbs they moved from. Those relationships also changed the way I viewed the small town I grew up in and the ways of living I considered normal and right. Through these experiences I realized that understanding other people better can result in your understanding yourself better. That's why we need each other—to help us see what we can't see alone.

But now I'm getting ahead of myself. There's more about all that to come.

Before we go much further, we'll do our best to agree on the terms of the conversation that follows. Join me in the next chapter.

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