



## Preface in Three Parts

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From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*  
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# An Iowa Heritage

a 1991 perspective  
from St. Helena, California

The story that begins in the 1880s when my Gunderson ancestors came to Iowa until now as I sit here in California, wondering where I can find a sense of homeland, is not a unique drama. It parallels a whole era of midwestern rural life. It is an era that began with people seeking new land for farms, homes, and communities. It is an era that totters now as people struggle either to remain a part of that land or move away, seeking new places to call home in this modern age, when such a small percentage of the population lives in rural America or is involved in farming.

The story of the rise and fall of the Midwest is not one to be explored solely by Iowans or other Midwesterners. As author Wendell Berry says, the crisis of agriculture is a crisis of culture. What the Midwest and the state of Iowa are going through, and what I experience as an expatriate are connected to issues of the country as a whole. These issues are related to meaning, vision, and values and to environmental, economic, and spiritual health.

I admire Garrison Keilor and how his stories on National Public Radio use details of everyday midwestern life, and yet appeal to a wide spectrum of people. He has done what artists, theologians, and other storytellers are called to do: to look at the ordinary under their noses and shape it in a way that, if held before us, helps us look at our lives, seeing them in ways that we have not seen before, and giving us new meaning and vision.



I am concerned about loss and grieving. There have been only a few times in our nation's recent history when we collectively faced death and grieved together. That happened when we watched the funeral procession for John F. Kennedy and saw the harnessed, yet riderless stallion. An event of similar impact, yet without the same ritualistic treatment, happened when we saw the space shuttle *Challenger* explode. Another example, albeit of a different nature, is that of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. For too many years, the United States had no collective focal point for reflecting on this war or honoring its war dead. Many people bottled up their feelings. Fortunately, the country now has this mirrorlike, black statue with its engraved list of casualties. People can come individually or in groups, look for a specific name or feel the impact of the entire memorial, create their own rituals, and know they are united with others in their grief and healing.

The question then arises as to when, where, and how do we come to terms with changes in rural America, less spectacular than the previous examples, but involving the death of an era and the loss of a way of life. The changes are slow and stretched out over time. It is hard to know when to stop and pay tribute because, although the shadow of loss is obvious, there is

some question as to whether or not there actually is a death. It is easier to deny the possibility than face it squarely. In addition, many of us have a stoic heritage that taught us not to admit feelings to each other or even to ourselves. So if change is slow, and it is not certain there is a death, and if people do not talk about feelings, how can there be a focal point for the masses to turn to in collective grief? Where is the symbol that will unite people, affected in diverse ways by the trauma happening in the rural Midwest? Where is the event that allows us to look into the darkness, knowing that in some way and at some time new symbols will arise?

The good thing about funerals is that they are collective rituals, marking a point in time, allowing people to unite, tap into their grief, and allow healing to begin. Small-town Memorial Day observances are wonderful in the ways people mingle at cemeteries, running into old acquaintances, greeting each other, and in many cases reminiscing about their heritage. Yet, the shortcoming is that the actual ceremonies pay respects only to military personnel without honoring our rural heritage or touching on the important questions related to the passing of an era. If there are no collective rituals designed to face the changes, there at least needs to be prose, poetry, photographs, videos, paintings, and other works of art for people to gather around.



In 1988, I did a slide show on the theme of death and renewal to present at the 125th anniversary of my hometown of Rolfe. I put sweat and tears into it. I thought it would be the last photo project I would do about Iowa. I figured I would get on with my life here in California. But getting on with life has meant going back. I have felt torn between going “cold turkey” and ending my photography of Iowa or investing more in my project ideas. Is the work important? Will there be support and an audience for it?

From the fall of 1989 to the fall of 1990, I spent 17 weeks in Iowa. At first I was naive and diffuse in my focus, but gradually I am defining my goals. Do I take what images I have on hand and complete some of my project ideas in a limited format? Or do I put energy into what I am doing now, soliciting support from the Iowa Humanities Board and other agencies to pursue these dreams full scale?

I am particularly concerned that women be supported in interpreting the midwestern experience. I would like to see a feminist perspective (or perspectives), because there are so many ways in which rural culture is patriarchal and woman’s voice has been lost. Fortunately, some women authors and artists have expressed themselves on these issues. However, I want to give voice to my experience, to create visual symbolism through the medium of photography, and perhaps video, accompanying it with written text or verbal comments.

My perspective is one of love for people such as my grandparents, their way of life on the homeplace farm, and other elements of growing up in Iowa. Yet my perspective is also one of disdain for aspects of that same heritage: the favoritism shown to men, the limited roles for girls, the rigidity about what kinds of relationships that are acceptable, the denial of feelings, the repression of imagination, and the style of discipline. My perspective is one of compassion and tenderness complicated by anger and frustration. It is also one of a tug-and-pull, dreaming about moving back to Iowa and yet wanting to stay my distance in order to do as Joseph Campbell suggests and come to terms with the myth system that I grew up in and, in turn, grow into the myth of my own life.

There are two sides of the coin in regard to my rural heritage. The stories and issues I want to explore are extremely important to me but are quite ordinary. There are plenty of Midwesterners with similar backgrounds. However, the fact that our stories have so much in common is no reason to negate my quest to interpret my rural heritage. Indeed, the ordinary nature of my story connects me with other people, and I hope whatever symbol or icon that comes to me in the process of creating a work of art will sustain not only me but others. Indeed this dichotomy of the exceptional versus the mundane of my heritage provides the raw material for this book.

There is synchronicity in my quest. In the spring of 1989, as I contemplated more photo and video forays to Iowa, I had no idea that during the next 12 months workers would tear down my grandparents' house on the homeplace and that my hometown would hold its last high school commencement exercises. At the same time that I am growing in understanding the significance of my rural heritage and coming into my own as a storyteller, the symbols of change in Iowa are ripe for harvest and important to interpret.

What is also clear as I pursue this project is the depth and energy I bring to it. My Iowa heritage is a gift and so is the passion to interpret it. As the two forces join together, the effect is like the fusion of two dynamos, creating something significant as the energy flows full circle.



Helen with pickup truck at the Joanne and Robert Brinkman farm in the northeast corner of Section 18, Garfield Township. The farm is along Highway 15 at the east end of the road where Helen grew up, 1989.

# Envisioning the Project

a 1991 perspective  
from St. Helena, California

If you head out of my hometown of Rolfe, Iowa, and go two miles south and look west, you will find the five-mile country road where I grew up. There is not much that is unique about my road, but because it's ordinary, yet easily delineated, it is a good focus for interpreting rural Iowa culture. The road and its people represent a manageable slice of Iowa farm life analogous to the sample of grain that a local co-op takes from a wagon of corn in order to examine the quality. And that is my intent: to examine the quality of farm life throughout the years along my road.

In many ways, the process will be like that of an archeologist who selects a specific *tell*, a site that is ordinary on the surface, in order to dig in and learn about a culture. I have already begun to examine the road, but with a camera instead of a pick and a shovel. I have also been talking with people, looking at old photos, and studying abstracts for almost every unit of land along the road. There is more to the road than I had expected when beginning to photograph and videotape all the farmsteads, both occupied and abandoned, along the five miles. I hope to continue the project, gathering more visual images, writing about my personal perspectives, and interviewing people who still live on the road in addition to people who have moved away and other resource persons.

Recently a video about the history of railroads in Iowa, entitled *Tails of the Rails* was produced and supported in part by the Iowa Humanities Board. According to producer Dirk Eitzen, he chose the topic of railroads as an entree to meeting ordinary people, getting them to talk about their own lives, and exploring the culture of rural Iowa and the way it is changing. His documentary was more about the people and their experiences than the history of the railroad per se.

My project will be about the lives of those who have lived on what I call "my road," using it as an opportunity to get them to talk about their experiences. The project will be about rural Iowa history and folklore, giving voice to rural people. It will not be simply for rural audiences.

An advantage of doing a project about my road is that no one has done a history of it. It's not an established unit of culture like a town or county that has already published its history. The road has no institutions such as schools, churches, newspapers, veterans' organizations, or women's clubs, which would insist on having their say. There are no renowned founding fathers or mothers whose epitaphs must be included. There are no political bigwigs or self-aggrandizing Main Street personalities. The road can provide a sampling of ordinary life, giving voice to people who are involved with the whole fabric of rural life, but not beholding to anyone except themselves in telling their stories.

What attracted me to this project was the visual impact of the road with its many abandoned farm sites: some with only one or two buildings left, some with no buildings and hardly a sign that there ever was an active farmstead.

My family moved to the road when I was an infant in 1945. Subsequently, my knowledge of the area spans nearly a half century.

As changes continue to take place, it will be interesting to see the landscape of my road and the area around it. Certainly there will be more abandoned farmsteads; perhaps even my parents' place will be gone. The county might close additional roads so farmers can plow them back into productive land, and the countryside may become more like that of Kansas.

When I look at the abandoned farm buildings, I see them as ruins worth examining and recording. They possess a sense of beauty and dignity, even though many people would never stop to take a second look or recognize their significance. The buildings won't be around much longer, but they need not breathe a last breath with no further function. If presented well on film, they will serve as an icons for looking at the past, pondering the present, and moving into the future with a sense of what some theologians call "the eternal now."

These abandoned buildings are what first caught my eye and attracted me to do a project about my road. However, there is still considerable latitude in deciding where to focus, what phase of history to examine, what themes to explore, what voices to present. One focus could be the crop of us kids who rode the school bus in the 50s: exploring what it was like to grow up on a farm in that era, examining family environments, speculating about the hopes our parents had when they moved to the road, looking at how rural culture has shaped us, and finding out who and where we are now that we are grown.

Or the project could look solely at school bus routes in relation to patterns of school consolidation. The road project could step even further back in history, picking up the perspective of someone like Don Grant who grew up along the road in the 30s. The project could then look at the many land transactions that took place around 1929 and the early 30s. During that period, one of the land abstracts points to the foreclosure of a Rolfe bank. Further back, many abstracts include the controversy involving a Mr. Stockdale who, in the late 1800s, contracted with the county to build a new courthouse and a bridge across the Des Moines River in return for all the wetlands in the county. Of course, there is an even earlier history of the United States deeding land to the railroad companies, who in turn sold property either to entrepreneurs or directly to settlers. Each of these stories and countless others could make fascinating entry points for further study.



The Gundersons have been large landholders, mainly southwest of Rolfe but with one farm northeast of town. We have thought of the property as our land and that we will always be there, either ourselves or someone in the family lineage. But there may be a day when the Gunderson name will be as obscure to the area as Charlton or Dady. Or perhaps we will be like the Shannon family whose name shows up as landowners in the plat book but who otherwise have no identity in the area, no familiarity with the people, and no legitimate connection to a rural heritage except holding titles to farmland.

This brings up issues, not just of nostalgia, but of ethics and absentee landownership. A key to a rural heritage is the concept of people owning and living on the land. Osha Gray Davidson describes the ideals of our ancestors well in his recent book *Broken Heartland*:

To a people whose ancestors had only recently been peasants in Europe, owning land was seen not only as a path to wealth but also, more importantly, as the sole guarantee of freedom. As one colonial farmer wrote, “We have no princes for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world.” (page 22)

The country has radically moved away from this ideal; however, it may never have existed as well as we would like to think it did. Our nation is moving toward a two-class culture, and there is what Davidson calls the “rise of America’s rural ghetto.” It is hard for me to know where I fit.

Through the years, I have received land from my grandparents and parents. I am able to live in California, earning income from it while someone else does the farming. I am not personally caught up in the crises of losing land, being forced off a farm, living in poverty, or having to work for a meat-packing company or Wal-mart to survive. In that respect, I am on the outside, looking in at the farm crisis and at times wondering whether I have a legitimate right to interpret rural Iowa life. The truth is that everyone has a right to interpret his or her own experience, and the notion of a rural Iowa heritage will differ depending on the person.



Of course, there is an era and an issue I have not mentioned. The project could step even further back in history to look at how our nation has treated the Native Americans. Somehow in my growing up years, I believed that the history of Iowa began in the 1800s around the time that the Gunderson family and other settlers came to Pocahontas County.

Many of us recognize that we have pushed Native Americans off the land to the periphery of society and made it nearly impossible for their cultural values or ways of life to survive. What we must also understand is that a culture that exploits will eventually be exploited by someone bigger.

I never thought that the kind of life I knew growing up in Iowa would be jeopardized. I always thought there would be family farms, even if I had not figured out how to be part of it personally. I always thought farming would be valued and farmers treated fairly. I never thought this way of life would be endangered by exploitative and alien forces, including governmental policies that care little about rural values. However, had I studied history closer, I would have been aware that many of these issues have confronted farmers throughout the history of the Midwest.

That which I call the “rural Iowa culture” is really quite young, about 150 years old. It is hard to think that in such a short time our heritage has barely been planted and risen up, only to fade away or become something very different than our ancestors envisioned. The Native American cultures had existed for a longer period of time and now are nearly erased. What will become of our heritage?

It is important to see our ancestors as pilgrims who were displaced from their national origins, faced uncertainty, traveled to a foreign country, and eventually established new homes. Their strength or identity did not come from remaining on one site forever. Not many people in the history of civilization have been able to do that.

The farms where many of us grew up are important icons, prompting the mind's eye to recall specific places and people who represent the virtues of our heritage. However, we must not make them into idols or let our personal identity or sense of God be locked up in one farm, one road, or a particular myth system.

For some of us, including me, who are the product of a rural heritage, it can also be tempting to look back and project a certain kind of security on the farms and family structures where we grew up. Yet we know we cannot go home again. Even if we could, we would find that some of the things that seemed virtuous in those situations will not serve us well now. I may be sounding ambivalent, but that is part of the struggle of sorting out values. It has been an arduous process for me to scrutinize the myth systems that I grew up with and envision the ones that I want to grow into. Joseph Campbell, in his interviews for public television on the power of myth, talked about the changing nature of virtues. He said that a quality that may have been virtuous in one era may later be a liability when circumstances change, and vice versa.

It is important to look at this thing that is called a rural heritage, honoring its positive qualities and being aware of legacies that limit us. As Carol Bly pointed out in a lecture for the Iowa Humanities Board and in her book *Letters from the Country*, there is much that is good about midwestern rural life, and we should not apologize for it. But she goes on to say how it has shaped people, teaching them to repress feelings and devalue the imagination. There may be reasons that some of our ancestors were so stoic. Perhaps it was a virtue they needed in order to survive. Today, it is not a virtue. Instead we need to know what we are feeling and be able to communicate in depth with other people. We also need active imaginations to discover approaches to living that are relevant to today's challenges.

A few years ago, I was at a New Year's Day retreat. The leader gave a definition of *home* that I found eye-opening and comforting. She said, "Home is not a place but a path you travel and where you meet your family." This definition helps me see my road in Roosevelt Township as a path that many people have traveled in the migration of people coming — some staying and some going — in the history of rural Iowa. It is a place where they have met other people who have become part of a shared heritage. It is no longer my home but a significant part of the path I have traveled.

I realize life is a process of movement and that the journey into the future is as important as the heritage that has brought me to this point. But as I meet the challenge to move ahead, I feel a passion to go back and examine my road. The quest is valid, and just as there can be a certain kind of spiritual discipline found in intimately farming one piece of land, there can also be a spiritual dimension in intimately examining one segment of culture and creating a statement or work of art about it.

# Piecing a Whole

a 2002 perspective  
from Gilbert, Iowa

During 1996 — the 125th anniversary year of Iowa becoming a state — the Friends of the Oskaloosa Public Library invited me to give the keynote talk at their annual meeting. The late Bev Everett, who coordinated my visit, asked me to send a summary of what I intended to talk about so she could give it to the media. I was not a veteran speaker with a well-honed message. However, I penned some thoughts and told her the title would be “We the People: Iowa’s Sesquicentennial as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community.”

What I wrote reflects the struggles, questions, and ideas I have had since the fall of 1989 when I began photographing the farm buildings along the road where I grew up. For several years, my project involved the gathering of materials — taking photographs, shooting video footage, conducting oral histories, borrowing photographs, doing courthouse research, and keeping a data base of information. It seemed fine in the early part of the 1990s to be doing just that; yet, as time wore on, I became concerned that I would never emerge from the gathering phase and produce something with the materials. Fortunately, a couple of public libraries and some galleries invited me to show an exhibit about the project. Even so, I often worried that when it came time for me to leave this earth, my tombstone would say, “Well, she always said she was going to do a book or finish her video, but the poor soul never did — what a pity.”

In part, the delay in producing a book or video has to do with the fact that I am dealing with current history and my story continues to be played out in real life. My parents still live along the road, and I have no idea when they will choose to move or when health problems will force them to move. The story of my road will take on drastic new meaning for me when my parents no longer live there — or when they depart from this earth.

Another part of the delay has to do with the fact that radical changes are happening in agriculture — in other words, the story of farming is on going. It has been said that in Iowa if you watch the corn real closely on a sunny day in July, you can see it grow. I haven’t actually seen corn grow, but the analogy is a good one for describing the changes in agriculture. There is a lot of seasonal routine that makes farm life appear to be the same from one year to the next. However, if you stop and pay attention, for instance as I do as an outside observer with my camera — you can see changes happening right in front of your face. There is the razing of buildings, the removal of fences, the removal of a mile of dirt road, the last hayfield, the last cattle and pigs, the first tractor with caterpillar treads used for tillage, and the first genetically modified seed as evidenced by new corporate seed signs posted along the road. The rate of agricultural change in the last decade, just as the rate of change in society at large, is much faster than our ancestors would ever have envisioned or than I could have imagined as a child in the 1950s.

Another part of the delay has to do with my own maturation and coming to terms with my

love/hate relationship with my rural heritage. And as is often the case with someone trying to express herself, there was (or is) that element called the writer's block.

For a long time, I have known the issues that I want to address in this project, but it has been hard to find a focus among the many threads of thought. It has been (and still is) hard to fathom giving voice to any matters of depth that family members or other people might find offensive.

I've appreciated the opportunity to mount exhibits about my road. I am glad Beverly Everett invited me to speak to the Friends of the Oskaloosa Library. Each of those projects or, should I say, deadlines, was a catalyst for me to form my thoughts and organize my materials one more notch toward ending the gathering phase and beginning the production process.

The letter I sent to Beverly explaining my tentative ideas for my talk is a good barometer of the issues that were on my mind in 1996— not only for her library program but for any eventual book or video I would create. Here is some of what I wrote:

I may speak about the value of the arts (photography, literature, etc.) as a mirror and shield for us to use in understanding who we are and to gain wisdom to meet the challenges that face us. The arts can be like the shield in Greek mythology that Athena gave Perseus so he could slay the monster Medussa and not be killed in the process.

I may speak about how I started out with a passion to return to Iowa to photograph the rural scene; that I was drawn to photograph abandoned buildings but that the process led to other interests; that there was an inner eye leading me toward something — toward dealing with my love/hate for my heritage; that my work has given me insights and wisdom and has been a healing process; that my project has put me in touch with many people; and that I have discovered community through it.

I may also speak about rigidity; about the hazard of not being able to talk about tough issues; about people becoming divided and labeling each other and not really knowing who each other is. But I would also talk about how we may not even know ourselves as individuals very well because (for the most part) our culture is one that stays on the surface of things. Where is it that we can feel safe to explore who we are as individuals and what our passions are all about? Can we truly have healthy families and communities if we follow the advice that says, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"?

What do we see about ourselves and our heritage when we look at an exquisite photo of an abandoned farm or of draft horses at work, when we read a memoir of rural life or listen to Garrison Keillor spin a tale, when we hear the hymn "Tis a Gift to be Simple" or "For the Beauty of the Earth," or when we see a film such as *Country* or *Field of Dreams*?

What do we yearn for in the past and what do we hope for in the future? Do we dare dream? How can we be imaginative in hard economic times when there is a movement for our culture to be more rigid and intolerant? Can we let our imaginations lead us into creative and wise solutions?

People need more than bread; they need roses too. A person needs to nurture the soul, belong to community, reach for the future, and become all of who she or he is meant to be as an individual. And finally, if our communities aren't what they used to be, how can we find new ways to establish a sense of community?

The title I gave Beverly for my talk could easily be converted to fit my road project: "We the People: A Rural Road Project as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community." Of course, the project is not a democratic one; it is my project and in ways is a portrait of myself. I recall a portrait photography class that I took at a community college in Napa, California. We spent the initial class sessions in tedious discussions, trying to define portraiture. In the process, I realized that any work of art is a self-portrait of the artist. An artist who chooses a bright and cheery scene and portrays it with glossy colors is creating a reflection of that dimension of herself. An artist who instead picks an isolated and somber scene, perhaps a lone corncrib in a hayfield, and renders it in black and white photography or in muted tones, is creating a reflection of another part of who she is. Some artists stay on the surface, avoiding deep inner joy or consternation. Some artists seek to create work that is soulful. I am one of the latter.

Granted, this is *my* project. The themes, the written essays, the oral history remarks, the photos, the layout, how it is edited — all these elements have been dictated in an unilateral way. On the other hand, I have deliberately chosen to include the stories of people who have lived along my road rather than focus on a singular autobiography or family history. Hopefully, the inclusion of multiple voices will add interest to the project, not only because of the variety of stories, but because of the variety of mindsets.

It is easy to fall back on stereotypes and assume that all people from small-town, rural Iowa would think alike. Instead, it is fascinating to discover how people, who all have lived along the same road, can be the product of different myth systems: different ways of seeing things and different values. It is valuable, however, that this project is being done by one person rather than by a committee or by other democratic processes. The latter usually has a way of watering down a creative project — taking the bubbles out of champagne and the fizz out of a bottle of pop. Also, not many people would take the time to gather all the material and then churn away with it to produce a quality final project.



Sometimes this work comes easy, even the writing. But often — especially with the writing — I feel like I am entering a dark tunnel or deep abyss. I wear a miner's helmet but it has a weak battery, and the light is dimmer than heck and practically useless. Yet I continue to enter this inner darkness to explore who I am, to understand what this project means, and to decide how I will interpret the experience of growing up along that road. By entering the abyss, I learn that it is not as important to be able to see with my eyes; instead, the key is to explore what I feel. The process is called soul work. The abyss is the space where a person can hear the still small voice of God as Elijah did. It is also a space where I can connect with my subconscious self. I discover memories that are asking for attention, and I must again experience those forgotten fragments of my life, whether painful or beautiful, in order for healing to

occur. The inner abyss is not full of death as is often associated with darkness. Instead, by entering it, I can discover a source of light to illumine not only the journey inward but the journey outward as I connect with other sojourners.

I recall conversations I have had with a spiritual director named Zoila, who is an Episcopal priest. We met in 1983 when I was in my second year of studies at a Presbyterian seminary in the San Francisco area. The next year, I interned with a congregation in St. Helena and in 1985, after graduation, returned to that town and focused on photography and developing a small business called Gunder-friend Productions. I opted to not seek an ordainable position for a variety of reasons. The key was my realization that I was more called to use my creativity and become an artist than to be a generalist as a pastor with the responsibility of encouraging the talents of parishioners.

Religious denominations and seminaries place a lot of emphasis on discerning who is genuine pastoral material. I have often said that the seminary atmosphere was like “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most pastoral of us all.” I once told Zoila that seminary was too much like a vocational school in that it trains pastors for specific congregational roles rather than understanding there are a whole spectrum of callings in life. She pointed to the term *vocational* and said it is derived from the Latin term *vocare* which means “to call.” In essence, she meant that regardless of the fact that the seminary process was a training ground for pastors, it had served me well in helping me discern my call to work with photography and express myself through the arts.



Finally, in the summer of 1993, I decided to move back to Iowa, a step I had dreaded for a long time. Although I felt more truly myself in California, I also knew that in order to take my road project seriously, I had to return to my home state and be more accessible to my hometown area. Being here with my own apartment and car is much better than trying to do the project by commuting between Iowa and California. To have remained on the West Coast, I would have needed to pay high fares, then either rent or borrow a car, and stay with people at the risk of overdoing my welcome or the risk of trying to accomplish too much in one trip before heading back to the West Coast.

It was difficult to contemplate the move back to Iowa but easy to discount the value of my work. It was also easy to question why I had gone to seminary and tempting to think of myself as a failure compared to other graduates who had gone on to be ordained and take pastoral positions. But Zoila did not criticize my choices. Instead she encouraged me to pursue the call to work on my Iowa projects.

Zoila had a neat way of reframing my misconceptions. When we first met in 1983, it was at the beginning of the Lenten season, and I asked if she expected me to give up something for Lent. Instead, she asked me what it was that I wanted to take up — perhaps regular walks in the green hills covered with oak trees in the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed behind the seminary. She also had a way of reinterpreting liturgical symbolism such as the eucharist. She saw beauty and soulfulness in my photography. She knew my story about my rural background, seminary journey, longing to find a career niche, and dreams of being of service to humanity. She often said that I should think about my work in the framework of providing bread for the world.

One of our most poignant conversations occurred in January 1993. Zoila suggested that I was not creating something new under the sun with my road project. Instead, she said I was working with something that already existed. She went on to explain that I was bringing together aspects of different peoples lives and shaping the pieces into a form that people could use to reflect on their lives and to find sustenance. An image of the Lord's Supper flashed through my mind. I suggested to Zoila that it would be a significant ritual if each person who came to worship brought a scrap of bread representing his or her brokenness and that those pieces would be joined together through the mystery of the liturgy to create a loaf of bread to be used for Holy Communion. In other words, the liturgical leader would break apart the newly created loaf and offer the bread back to the people to feed them at a deeper level. Indeed, the word *liturgy* means the work of the people. Zoila agreed and said that the process I described was what communion was all about — that together, our brokenness can be transformed and made into bread for one another and the world.

The work of a liturgist, theologian, or artist is to work with common, or perhaps even mundane, elements of life and use them to interpret life in meaningful ways. The challenge is to work with these elements in a mystical or soulful way that allows the spirit to move through them. That is what Garrison Keillor does when he takes scraps of small town, rural Minnesota life and spins them together in ways that feed the souls of his listeners.

I also liken the process to what I have learned in the past several years about making quilts. I never thought I had it in me to make quilts but often after I came back to Iowa, I stayed with a friend, Ruth, and her family in Pocahontas in their big Victorian house. She was an excellent quilter but a conventional one and a purist, sewing her bed-size quilts by hand. One Christmas vacation, after I realized that a person could piece a quilt with a machine, Ruth got me started on making my first quilt block. Then I was hooked. It was not long before I asked Mother if I could have the Singer Featherlite portable sewing machine, which our family obtained in the late 1950s for 4-H projects. The Featherlite is a durable and smooth-running model coveted by many quilters.

During the 1990s, I also recall meeting a man named Carmon who is a textile artist and had a fabulous exhibit of quilts at the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship in Ames. His genre was entirely different than Ruth's. Instead of conventional quilts, his pieces were prophetic and included found objects such as a jacket pocket, a zipper from a pair of blue jeans, a photo of J. Edgar Hoover, or fabric he had silk-screened with the staff, musical notes, and lyrics of the hymn "Tis a Gift to be Simple." Carmon also coordinated three large quilt panels — each some 14 feet high and six feet wide — for a mural that hangs in the main meeting room of the fellowship. When Carmon designed the quilt, he incorporated many small pieces of fabric that members donated to the project to represent their lives or the life of the fellowship. And although Carmon did the master planning, many hands worked on quilting the finished panels.

I still quilt, but I am not a conventional quilter such as Ruth nor an innovative one such as Carmon. I visit the quilting stores now and then — it seems there is one in every significantly sized Iowa town these days — to stock up on material and eventually find ways to use it. My repertoire includes pillow covers, place mats, and quilted vests. My approach is vastly different than the old-time process in which a quilter used scraps left over from sewing projects, material from clothing the family had outgrown, and chicken feed sacks made of cotton. It is amazing how those artisans could piece something together that was functional yet beautiful, providing both warmth and nurture with value not only during their lifetimes but in the lives of their descendants.

Quilting has been one way to learn to trust the creative process, especially since I do not use prescribed patterns or kits. A person cannot rush a quilt. It takes a long time, patience, and plenty of attention to detail to make one. That is also true of a long-term project such as my book.

Another interesting aspect of quilt making is the role of intuition. Sure, it helps to know math and have an aptitude for geometry, but a large portion of my quilting involves playing around with colors and fabric designs. I may get obsessed and stay up all night hauling out swatches from my stockpile of fabric. I place them on a large desk to see what goes together. Sometimes, two fabrics that I thought would be great partners simply do not go together. Sometimes, I have to dig to the bottom of my stockpile before I find a nearly forgotten piece of fabric that ends up working perfectly in the new project. However, I cannot force these choices. Intuition is important. In addition to playfulness, a creative project involves a spell or two of musing to discern what the design will be. Sometimes, the final design is vastly different than the one I had in mind when I bought the fabric.

All this is true of my road project as well. I may have had a notion of where I wanted to go when I started this book, but putting it together has meant a long process of staying up late at night and digging into the stockpile of written materials and photographs to discern what fits together and in what pattern.

The final parallel between making a quilt and doing this book has to do with how new ideas or possibilities occur during an artistic endeavor. Sometimes, as I begin cutting fabric and sewing pieces together, the creative muse nudges me and suggests that another color or fabric pattern would work better than the choices I had made at the outset of the project. I have heard writers say this happens when they work on a novel. An author may think he or she knows the plot of a book when starting the first chapter, but in the midst of writing, a new character or story line appears that demands attention. It has been important for me to shift from the gathering phase of my road project to the production phase of putting this book together. Engaging in the creative process provides a new way of learning about myself and the culture in which I grew up. And a few new characters and story lines have appeared that demand attention. But most importantly the act of writing — deciding what needs to be said and in what tone — helps me learn more about myself and the culture of my youth. Indeed, the process helps me find my voice and has brought about healing. As one friend, Mary Helen Stefaniak, who is a writer and reviewed some of my work in 1995, said, one of the themes of my project could be “The softening of hard feelings and rigid boundaries.”

Just as any quilt should be appreciated as a whole without peering closely to see the flaws in how the pieces were cut or stitched, I hope readers will view this work as a whole and not get hung up on any parts that may be uncomfortable to read. As in any work of art, it is important to have a range of light and dark features, a spectrum of color tones, and variety of textures to make a meaningful whole. I have attempted to assemble the elements of this book in a thoughtful and fair way with no intention to harm anyone.



I recall that Mother, when she was director of the Rolfe Public Library, orchestrated an oral history project for the town in the 1970s. She hoped that all the members of our family would make a tape. I was living in Fargo then, and in 1981, just before I headed west to seminary, I

wrote an outline and then sat on my living room couch with a tape recorder and recorded my thoughts about my life and decision to enroll in seminary. After listening to the tape, Mother wrote me a letter and said that I had been blunt in my remarks. I responded that the word “candid” would have been a more appropriate description than “blunt.”

How a quilt or my road project is perceived depends on the eyes of the beholder. As I mentioned before, some people still cling to the adage, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say it at all.” However, it is important for people to know themselves and give voice to that which is calling for expression — not only for the health of the individual but for the health of society.



Detail of a quilt at the 1900 farm at Living History Farms near Des Moines, circa 1989.

From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*  
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