

## Care Shaped by Place

*Janice and Tom Anderson were sitting at the table with other friends at the church picnic. These people had known each other at least a good part of their lives. Most went to high school together; a few went off to college but returned afterward to the town they grew up in. They knew each other's parents, siblings, and cousins, and the appurtenant stories. Tonight the group is sharing stories about the fate of their young adult children and the fate of their own lives given the directions their young adult children seemed to be headed.*

*Tom was particularly agitated with their son's announcement that he was not planning to come back "home" after graduation. Over the school break Michael announced to the family that he did not want to come home and work the family farm. Instead he planned to get a master's degree in business and try to get a job with a big firm somewhere.*

*Tom was recounting to his friends the hard work that he and his father and his father's father had put into this land, about the sacrifices they had made to make it even possible for Michael to go to college. He recounted the story of his great-grandfather staking out his land and how important the land is to the future of the family. He recalled the struggles his family and many others in town faced during the farm crisis of the 1980s. They were some of the few that were able to hold on. He would hate to see the land fall out of the family's hands. All the while Tom was talking, the others at the table were nodding affirmatively, reliving the familiar story that they and their families shared with Tom and Janice.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Care is happening at this table, and it is happening in the context of Christian friendship. Their care for one another is shaped by the love and concern grown out of a shared history, a building of trust, a sense of interdependence and participation in a community of faith, whether they can articulate it or not. When Steven, the pastor, joins the table he participates in

this circle of care, but as the pastor he will also bring something different to the table. He brings the authority and training of the pastoral office, and he may also bring, by virtue of the office combined with trusting relationship and vital faith, the possibility of building on the care that is already taking place in a way that facilitates more healing and transformation. Others may well make the same move, but our focus is on how the pastor can be intentional about seeing this conversation as an opportunity to not only support Tom and Janice and their friends, but to encourage healing change within each of them and their family and to broaden that care to include the broader community in a way that moves toward God's hope for the world.

Specifically this chapter looks at how healing and transformative care can be shaped by place. The care that is happening in the event described above is being shaped by place—the table, the church, the town, the land—whether anyone realizes it or not. This bit of practical wisdom, that place matters, is something that rural and small-town people remind us to attend to. People in rural communities are often particularly attuned to place, to what it means to be located there and not somewhere else, to what it means to develop in relationship to a place. There is a heightened awareness of where they are and why they are there, whether or not their attachment is positive. In part, this awareness is a result of not being located at the center of power, in metropolitan areas. As discussed in the introduction, this book's major claim is that place matters in the sense that it matters *where* care is being practiced as much as *how* and *with whom*.

This chapter looks at how place, and the meanings people attach to it, shapes persons and what that means for care in the context of Christian faith. A discussion of “place” as something that includes more than the coordinates on a map leads to thinking about the particular kind of place in the scene above, a Midwestern farming community. Next, this chapter looks at how persons construct identities in relation to place and considers what it means to be God's creatures in terms of our need for “home” and personal relationships with the earth. Finally, the chapter suggests possibilities for practicing care shaped by place with specific reference to the situation that opens the chapter. How could the conversation at the picnic table actually be a step toward more healing and justice for the families, congregation, and community represented there?

### PLACE IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Healing care in Chimaltenango, Guatemala is different from care in New York City, which is different from care in Stanley, North Dakota. Transformative

care, even when practiced by the same people, is done differently when it takes place in a church building, a hospital, or a soup kitchen. It looks different, sounds different, smells different, and feels different. This seems obvious when stated so simply, but in what ways does the “where” of care matter? How can the people of the church influence more intentionally the impact of place on care in ways that foster the richer life that Jesus imagined for us all? Why does moving from one place to another make such a difference, while moving between another two places hardly seems different at all? How does a conversation at a picnic table in a Midwestern farming community present an opportunity for a particular kind of care?

The most common understanding of place is that it is space turned into something with meaning. Persons make a home “my place” by bringing in things that they like or have significance. When open space is given a name it becomes a place. One geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, says that if space is “that which allows movement, then place is pause.”<sup>1</sup> Place marks investment of time, energy, resources, and self. Place makes the abstract of space something that matters, something one will act to protect, and something one will grieve if lost.

There are several layers to place-making. Place involves first, a physical location that can be marked on a map, identified by the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates. Built places might move from one coordinate to another but they are nevertheless located at each moment in a specific location. Maps represent human interpretations of the land and political boundary-making; thus places always develop in the web of human social relationships. Places develop in power struggles over naming, owning, and control of resources, both human and natural. Within any place there is a constant interaction of multiple interpretations of what it means to be in that place and what kind of place it is. Geographer Tim Cresswell reminds us to think about the way power is functioning in these interpretations.<sup>2</sup> To refer to place is to participate in power that is exercised through cultural norms, discourse, institutions, and practices. An analysis of power dynamics will ask the question: Who benefits from this interpretation of reality? Who benefits from doing things this way? An analysis of the workings of power will also ask: What is being left out? What are alternative ways to think about something? What is not being said? Who is excluded from the picture or story being told as it is? The narratives of place told by people in rural communities are told from particular vantage points that are also shaped by larger cultural discourses.

Stories about place are always told at multiple levels all at once. British geographer Keith Halfacree suggests a threefold approach to thinking about the many aspects of a place.<sup>3</sup> First is the “formal representation” of that place

in the dominant discourse. How are rural places and small towns referred to by those in power? How are they portrayed in media, literature, and political rhetoric? Second are the references residents make to themselves and their living places. What does it mean to the residents to live where they do? How do they both internalize and resist the way they are represented by others? People develop relationships with places, emotional attachments that form their sense of who they are. Cultures develop when people share a common area. Places become imbued with meaning and a kind of subjectivity. Think about how often someone says something like “this place speaks to me” or “this place is just begging for . . . ,” and many people speak as if places call them to be, as in “this is where I belong.” Cresswell describes place as a “field of care.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, places define what matters, where energy and resources are invested. To speak about place is to speak about a complex interrelatedness between earth, built structures, and human relationships.

A third aspect of a place is the actual day-to-day lives of the people living there. How is the place structured and what do people actually do there? How are the narratives of meaning intersecting with the workings of economic, political, and individual agency to shape the work and relational life of people living in the community?

A contextual approach to care will see Janice, Tom, and Michael’s situation as one manifestation of the currents of power, practice, and meaning in the culture at large, and not simply as one family’s interpersonal struggles. For instance, we will find that young adults leaving small towns and rural areas in the Heartland is a major issue for the region, not just this family. The tensions related to the out-migration are strongly influenced by the economic and political changes in agriculture in this country. To care for this family will mean giving attention to both the particular relational dynamics between these family members and to the interconnections between this family and their particular place. One aspect of this place is what it represents in the cultural imagination of the United States and what is at stake for the country in keeping that image alive.

### THE FAMILY FARM AS ICON

Care for the Andersons and others in this town requires that the pastoral caregiver understand the layers of meaning that “Midwestern farming community” holds in the broader culture. Acres of rolling fields, the barn and farmhouse, a few cows, the garden, a swing hanging from a tree limb, and a hardworking, honest, and trustworthy farmer (of European descent) with his wife and children. The small-town center with a post office, store, café, school,

church, doctor's office where everyone knows each other and cares for one another—this is the image that most of us in the United States conjure up when we hear “Midwestern farming community.” It is the picture in children's storybooks and in U.S. American paintings, like *American Gothic*. For many in the U.S., mostly those tied to European immigrants of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this picture represents the core of who we are as a nation and what we are about as a people. Though very few people in the United States still earn a livelihood via farming, this image is a powerful symbol of one aspect of our history, and like all symbols it reveals and obscures much. It reveals, for instance, our values of hard work, self-sufficiency, neighborhood ties, and the importance of land. It obscures the politics of land acquisition, the economics of low-wage laborers, the struggle over farming policies, and inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, and other social identities. It obscures the reality that while perhaps many long for what the symbol represents, very few want to actually live that life. In many ways, as a culture we are tied more to the symbol than we are committed to the real people of rural agricultural communities and their small towns.

People have a high respect for rural life, but they do not want to live in the remote areas of the Great Plains, or the Heartland, as it is often called. Perhaps what we want is the symbol, the dream, the ideal, but not the reality. In 2001 the Kellogg Foundation interviewed thousands of people in urban, suburban, and rural settings about their perceptions of rural America. People in all three settings held an interesting set of dichotomous perceptions:

[R]ural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and difference; and rural life is richer in *community* life, but epitomized by *individuals* struggling independently to make ends meet. Rural America offers a particular quality of life including serenity and aesthetic surroundings, and yet it is plagued by lack of opportunities, including access to cultural activities.<sup>5</sup>

In two items, rural persons rated themselves significantly higher than their urban and suburban counterparts rated them—their level of sophistication and their level of tolerance; and they were more likely to see themselves as having stronger families than urban/suburban residents. Each population reported that rural life is needed to “preserve that which defines America,” and the “family farm epitomizes the best of American life.”<sup>6</sup>

The Kellogg report found that most U.S. Americans think that rural life is agriculturally based, set in beautiful landscapes of pastures, livestock, and crop rows, and whose residents value religion, self-reliance, and community. While this is not an accurate picture of rural America as a whole (less than 10 percent of rural residents make their living via farming) it comes closest to reality in the rural Heartland. Certainly a pastor coming into a Midwestern farming community will want to be aware of the assumptions about what that life actually entails and check her or his own emotional responses to this iconic image. The pastor might also want to keep in mind the depth of this image ingrained into the community itself. To what extent do they see themselves as fitting this image and/or feel pressure to maintain this way of life for the sake of the whole country? How do they live with the dichotomies identified in the Kellogg report? Sometimes the strong need to maintain an image results in minimizing or excluding from consciousness some aspects of actual life on the farm or in the rural Midwest that do not quite fit the image. Most people from urban and suburban areas have little to no knowledge of the business of agriculture or the day-to-day life on the farm. A pastor will want to wonder about how members of the community acknowledge the discrepancies between what they do and what people think they do. Transformation toward healing and justice requires us to attend to the excluded or denied aspects of the pictures we create and the stories we tell.

In order to offer meaningful pastoral care, a newcomer pastor to a farming community like the one the Andersons live in will want to gain some knowledge about farming and agriculture in general and in particular about farming in that area. A pastor who has experience with farm life will want to make sure not to generalize too much from that experience. Knowledge and experience are good starting places for care but always with the caveat that each person, and each community, while in some ways like all others or some others, is also like no others. So what do we know about Midwestern farming communities and agriculture that can provide a base for thinking about day-to-day life in that setting? What kinds of theological understandings might guide our interpretations of life on the farm?

### **LIFE ON THE FARM**

Considering the realities of the history of agriculture and how central agriculture has been in the rural landscape will help the pastor understand the congregation in agricultural communities. Memories and values will vary by generation. The land has played different roles in their sense of self as persons and as community. This may contrast sharply within generations and with the

majority culture. The fact that people in the majority culture have, for the most part, forgotten that persons are “landed,” always located on some piece of land that could be identified with lines of latitude and longitude, does not negate the impact of land. Indeed, the history of land and of those who work it may be as influential in human history as any other single dynamic. There was a time when this would not have been disputed because every family had some connection to land—if not the land of their origin as immigrants, then the land of the family’s history in the United States, the land of the storefront, the land of national parks and camping, and our individual land of residence. Most people could remember their parents’ or grandparents’ connections to land. Decades ago people were more aware than now that their future and the land’s were interconnected. Rural peoples remember this, even if they do not still live it. Until the third quarter of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of the human race lived by growing food and herding animals.<sup>7</sup>

The first European settlers who landed on the eastern shores of North America learned much from the indigenous peoples about living on the land. They formed agriculturally based colonies that for several decades supplied raw materials to Europe for value-added manufacturing. Some products returned as finished goods for the colonies. In the nineteenth century the family-owned and -operated farms, ranches, and local businesses became the norm in most regions of the country as an eager population settled the land between the coasts. The Homestead Act of 1862 enticed many to move westward to stake (and work) a claim. Technology dramatically and constantly changed nearly every aspect of the way food and fiber, products and services, were made and transported. The Industrial Revolution was the first wave marking this continuous change. However, for the most part, the structure of agricultural and small-business sectors of the expanding rural economy remained very much centered in family units and oriented to the land until well into the post-World War II years of the 1950s. Farmers, ranchers, bankers, dentists, doctors, and business people all had a stake in their local community. Shopping locally, volunteering for community services, being part of the local church or civic club, and patriotism were ways in which the rural community became a “great place to raise your kids.” Those who were born during the Great Depression and World War II, the elders of the congregation, may remember a golden era of agriculture. While farm prices fluctuated in the 50s and 60s, several factors came together in the 1970s to increase the income and optimism of U.S. farmers.

Farm magazines were predicting that the 1980s would prove to be the “Golden Age of American Agriculture.” They could hardly have been more

wrong. The prices of products declined, some say engineered by encouragement of overproduction. Declining prices led to a decline in the value of land; the decline in the value of land led to bankers' unwillingness to continue to lend the large sums of money they had encouraged only two or three years before; farmers found that they could not pay those loans; farm foreclosures soared in number; there was an exodus of people from the farms to the city or anywhere else they could find jobs, though many preferred to stay on the land even in much-reduced living conditions. Thus began the farm crisis of the 80s whose impact continues and has caused an upheaval in American life, and perhaps resulted in a different understanding of land ever since. It is estimated that some 600,000 farmers went out of business in the 80s, and that rippled through seed companies, farm machinery firms, grocery stores, gas stations, voluntary associations, and school systems. This left virtually no rural congregation or community unscathed.

The concentration and centralization of land ownership and federal subsidies tied to size of holdings and of production disadvantaged the smaller farmer. So long as land values continued to rise, bankers were willing—indeed eager—to loan money to farmers so that they could expand. Farmers were interested in increasing their income. All was well, as land values continued to rise until 1980–1984, when all of a sudden they plummeted. Farmers could no longer borrow the capital to support the acres and machinery they had projected. Many could not pay their debts, and only those who were well capitalized or had no debt survived. Many farms had to be liquidated or auctioned off.

This also left in question such foundations of the American belief system as the value of sacrifice and hard work, the importance of the “family farm” system of agriculture, the economic security of one’s children, the role of government and the economic system, and even the “American Dream” itself. It raised significant questions in smaller membership and rural churches about what this meant theologically; was it God who was punishing them? In response to these crises, the church mobilized hotlines, conducted seminars, hired staff, and cooperated with the Extension Service to mitigate the impact of the economic crunch. Such organizations as the Rural Chaplains or the Rural Church Network or the United Methodist Rural Fellowship and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference were created to address these concerns and to cushion the impact of foreclosures.

The well-being of the community no longer depended on local, owner-operator production. Much land went out of local control and operations became increasingly large-scale businesses run from elsewhere. Being subject

to firm policy regulations, banks and federal agencies did not or could not take into account community well-being or leadership. If the farmer who was the Scoutmaster or church council president defaulted on his or her loan, they were often lost to the community. The pool of leadership and of voluntary associations shrank. Town and country stores and businesses became franchises whose owners do not live locally. People's level of trust in and participation in government declined significantly (and this among the people who were and remain the most patriotic in the country). It has seemed to many rural peoples that the policies of their government have worked against their well-being and have assisted large corporations in gaining control over them.

Today farming has an entirely different look than it did years ago. The 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, the latest available at this moment, reports an overall increase in the number of farms, but a closer look reveals the results of the changes we have been describing. Between 2002 and 2007 there has been a large increase in the smallest-size farms. These are farms that are called "hobby" or "gentleman's" farms; in short, it is hard to imagine supporting a family or making a living from them. Either the people who are farming them are in retirement and producing only enough for tax purposes or they are working other jobs. They could be called "lifestyle farms"; their residents are not too dissimilar from suburbanites. There is a net loss of medium-sized farms, the owner-operator farms that are actually making a living from farming. The long-term increase in the largest farms (2000 acres or more) continues. The group with over a half-million dollars in annual sales has increased significantly. In summary, 2.5 percent of farms have 59.1 percent of farm sales. For the contemporary generation, farming has become a business much like other corporations.

There are far fewer family farms (owner-operated, with sufficient income to constitute a livelihood) than there were three decades ago. The prices paid to those who farm, or mine, or fish increase far less rapidly than the cost of production. These land- (and sea-) based rural industries are more and more entrusted to hired labor who are paid by the hour or by the bushel. This is very different from the way the older generation understands agriculture and the land. They have come under the economic and policy control of centers of power that do business in Minneapolis, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

It is still true that farmers or hired workers are on the front lines of taking care of the land, and that the way farming is practiced increases or decreases topsoil loss, pesticide and fertilizer usage, freshwater conservation, wildlife management, and the sustainability of the land. When farmers owned the land themselves, their future was tied to keeping the land healthy and

sustainable. That nexus disappears when someone else owns the land or controls one's agriculture practices. The consequence of uncoupling the nexus between ownership and labor is that the regeneration and long-term health of the land is not protected. The methods that farmers use to produce food have a major impact on our health and the health of the earth community. In many ways, they are our eco-representatives; their practices have a disproportionate impact on the air we breathe, the nutrition we consume, and the water we drink. Economics and power (ownership) enter into the care we take of the land, and of the way we identify with it.<sup>8</sup>

There are any number of other land issues that rural peoples are particularly aware of. These play into pastoral care issues and the quality of community and congregational life. One is simply: Who owns, and who works, the land? Do they care about the quality of food grown there, of the life lived there? Who controls the use of land? Another is the quality of the natural world in the neighborhood: the quality of water, the arability of the soil, the extent of erosion and runoff. Another is the movement of peoples into and out of the land: migrant workers, resident immigrants, youth, and so on. What is the quality of life around that place? How does the local government view the land; is natural capital an issue for them? What is the sense of public land? Is land accessible to poor people?

Certainly those who live in the midst of the land have a stake in its well-being. But then so do all those who depend on land for healthy food, for clean air, for good water; so do those who care about the distribution of a sufficient quality of life for all on the land; so do all those who care about their health and the long-term sustainability of a sufficiency for all and a shared happiness. How then is the church, which has been at the center of community, to respond to changing realities while recognizing the mix of various meanings of place? What does it mean to practice care in this complex reality? What are the most viable and transformational ways to do ministry in this context?

The Andersons and other families in their community live in the midst of these and other tensions and changes in agriculture, sometimes experienced as a choice between survival and corporate takeover. The fact that the Andersons were of the few that actually were able to maintain their farm through the farm crisis of the 1980s may mean that this farm represents even more to them.

### STAYING OR LEAVING?

The place in which Janice, Tom, Michael live poses particular developmental crises for the people who live there, especially the youth. Even though the Midwestern farming community holds such a prominent status in the U.S.

American mythology, as a result of the changes described above, most of those actual communities are slowly dying. Some have suggested that by the end of the twenty-first century most of these small towns will have disappeared. The farming communities of the Great Plains/Midwest generally fall into the category of “declining resource dependent” described in Chapter 1. While rural areas adjacent to metro areas are growing via urban sprawl and scenic areas are growing due to the in-migration of the wealthy and retirees, rural agricultural areas in the Plains and the Mississippi Delta are losing population. Deaths and migration to small cities or metro areas are not being offset by births and newcomers. “Will I stay or will I leave?” may be one of the central developmental questions for young adults raised in the Heartland’s small towns. In the Kellogg report cited above, almost 50 percent of current rural residents said that they had thought about leaving the area.

The reasons for the dearth of young adults seem to center around two issues—jobs and lifestyle. For the educated middle class there is little opportunity for economic success or meaningful high-skill or professional employment in small towns. Changes in agriculture may have made the family farm a less appealing occupation. The low-wage unskilled work has virtually no opportunity to earn a higher wage if she or he stays in the small agricultural town. In order to thrive, a community needs a diverse labor market and range of jobs. In addition to jobs and economic security, persons want a certain quality of life in the place they live. They want not only access to but a range of options for good schools, good health care, libraries, and recreation. These are shrinking rather than expanding in most rural areas in the middle of the country.

A recent book by two sociologists, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, concerned about the declining populations in the Heartland, studied young adults’ decision making about whether to stay or leave.<sup>9</sup> They identified four groups: stayers who seemed to be “destined” to stay, marry, work in low-wage or low-skilled jobs, and raise children in the community close to extended family and childhood friends; seekers who cannot wait to get out and experience the world; returners who go away and come back either because they fail to make it “out there” or because they want to go “home” to the small-town ambience, perhaps to raise a family; and achievers who, Carr and Kefalas argue, are raised to leave. Achievers are the bright successful children, like Michael, who from the beginning are on the college prep plan. In fact, even as towns mourn the decline of their towns, they are often proudest of those who grew up and left to take high-paying positions or do something “significant” with their lives in a city.

Most people, because we live in metropolitan areas, are only vaguely aware of the demise of this iconic American community. When told of the problem, many respond with certainty that something should be done to save these towns but have only a vague idea of why they feel this way or how the task might be accomplished. Even the residents themselves cannot clearly articulate why and how their town, their community, should be saved. Anyone entering the scene portrayed at the outset of this chapter without awareness of the background and centrality of this issue for a whole population in this country would miss a key aspect of the tension in the Anderson family. Michael is actually following a very common path for young adults in towns like his. His decision, while in some respects is his own, also reflects the economic, political, and cultural power struggles within a region and between that region and the globalized world. In the U.S., many families with young adults will encounter tensions as young adults go about establishing their own identity, but families in the rural farmland of the Great Plains experience that tension in a particular way that can remind us that identity is constructed in relationship to place and to the land, as well as to people.

### PLACE AND IDENTITY

Identity is the answer to the question of “who”: Who am I? Who are you? Who is he or she? The question, “Who are you?” is basic to human interaction and connection, and therefore to any act of care. One of the core commitments of meaningful pastoral care is the desire on the part of the caregiver to understand the other while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of the task. Caring requires the kind of listening and attending that begins with the simple desire to enter into relationship that honors a primary need of all human beings—to know and be known by other human beings. Before the desire to change must come the desire to connect, and that connection requires efforts at understanding the world from the other’s perspective. To care for Tom, Janice, and Michael will involve first trying to understand the meaning that Michael’s announcement holds for each of them, which requires also gaining some understanding of how each identifies self and the other two. Episodes of struggle or disorientation, like the one this family is experiencing, even momentary, are often struggles to incorporate new experience into identity, and are often the times that evoke a pastoral care response.

Identities are not wholly given to us, nor are they wholly of our own choosing. They are not stable entities that remain the same throughout one’s life. No one carries with them throughout life one stable, unified, or essential identity. Identity is established in an ongoing dynamic interface of the social

and the individual, of the personal and the political. With the passing of time and the accumulation of experience, identities are always a work-in-progress, an ongoing negotiation between what I make of myself and what others make of me. We carry multiple identities that shift and change depending on context. There are some aspects of identity established and nurtured early in childhood that remain resistant or slow to change, giving the appearance of stability and providing enough continuity with the past that we are recognizable to our self and others.

Our identities are constructed in relation to place, including the homes, towns, cities, and communities we live in and the land on which those places are located. Social psychologist Stephanie Taylor studied the intersection of identity and place narratives in conversations with women, asking them to talk about the places they have lived. She found that though in postmodern society mobility seems to reign, there is still strong evidence that identity is constructed in relation to place and constrained by normative narratives about who people are and how we should behave. We tell the story of who we are in narrative fashion, in terms of “sequence and consequence”<sup>10</sup> (what happened when and why it happened), but the narratives are not wholly our own invention, they follow familiar patterns and incorporate cultural norms, whether in congruence with or resistance to. Taylor suggests, for instance, that the “born and bred” narrative is alive and well in postmodern identity constructions. According to the norm of “born and bred,” a person is “from” somewhere, a place where there is long, generational connection, a place called “home,” a place with which a person experiences a common identity. Most postmodern place narratives do not identify such a place as a specific and stable location, but in Taylor’s conversations almost everyone referred to the ideal that one would have such a place in their lives. Rural communities with land-based economies may have a strong born-and-bred normative narrative since, while people can move and some work can be done anywhere, farming, mining, and logging, for example, are tied to land—which does not move except inch by inch over centuries. However, a postmodern normative narrative is emerging, one that Taylor calls the “opportunity and choice” narrative, which suggests that each person is free to choose who and where they want to be. Yet Taylor also found that the women she talked with sought to “choose” a kind of “idealized individuated home”<sup>11</sup> that referred back to the ideal of a place that is one’s home, a place that “is” me.

Michael’s identity is being formed by the mix of story lines—the stay or leave question for small-town young adults, the generational “born and bred” on the family farm, and the postmodern wealth of opportunity and individual

choice. Care for Michael by pastor, family, and friends will involve listening carefully for these multiple story lines and for the unique way that Michael is negotiating them in his own development, and to remember that this is one moment in time in a long-term work in progress.

Each of us comes to understand ourselves as persons formed by, at least in part, the places in which we reside. Meaning-making happens in circular fashion; we give meaning to the place but the place also gives meaning and identity to us. As Tom recites the stories of the farmland on which his family has lived and worked for generations, it is clear that his sense of who he is is tied to that place. Part of who he is has grown out of that land. Janice and Michael have also been molded by life in that place, but their story will not be the same as Tom's. Part of what a caring pastor will want to do is listen for the story of how each of them, and the larger community, understands his or her self in relation to the place in which they have grown.

People tend to define themselves and others partially in relation to the places they live, and the way we identify the place we live is always tied to the way we identify ourselves. The prevailing meanings assigned by the larger culture to a place always influence the personal identity narratives. This happens both when the prevailing meaning is positive, as in the iconic American farm, and when it is negative, as in the image of degradation and destruction linked to historic mining towns. In his study of the people who continue to live in former mining towns, David Robertson found an interesting twist to their self-portrayal in relationship to the place they live. The larger narrative of failure was interpreted at the local level as tenacity for survival and a community built on the commonality of hardship and struggle. This was the way the people described themselves, the town, and even the land. Robertson found that for these people the mine and mining were central figures in their identities, even after the mines have closed. Many described mining as "in their blood" and themselves as "tough" and "rugged" as the rock they mined. The land itself, because of their closeness to it, seems to have given both the town and its people their identity.

We have not found a similar close study of the intersection of identity and place in farming communities of the Heartland, but some have suggested that there is an "agrarian" sense of self and the world that arises out of living in this place. People from small towns and rural areas seem to describe themselves more in terms of place than suburban or urban folks.<sup>12</sup> Those who describe themselves as "country" reflect an "agrarian ideology," according to David Hummon, which means they value the "simple life" of self-sufficiency and closeness to nature. They see themselves as easygoing, tolerant, quiet, and

resilient, not unlike the plains and rolling hills that characterize the land upon which they live and work. Marty Strange, arguing for the preservation of family farms, suggests that there are a set of “agrarian values” that define the heart of family farmers: self-reliance, frugality, ingenuity, stewardship, humility, and commitment to family, neighbor, and community.<sup>13</sup> He also points out that the “bigger is better” norm that is creeping into farming conflicts with these values. If that is so, then we might wonder how people like Tom and Janice are incorporating this tension into their sense of who they are in the midst of these multiple, and sometime competing, possibilities for their identity projects.

As farmer parents and as children of farmer parents, Janice and Tom come from a legacy that ties security and success for current and succeeding generations to land. Hope for a better future is in the land, the farm.<sup>14</sup> As they age, Tom and Janice’s attachment to the farm may become more apparent, especially if they face having to leave the farm because they are no longer able to keep it up and there is no family successor to take over. For some older adults, especially those who have lived in one place for most or all of their lives, their sense of self is so deeply tied to the place that one without the other is unimaginable.<sup>15</sup> We might expect grief over losses realized and anticipated, as well as a sense of uncertainty about who they will be in the future.<sup>16</sup>

However, Janice and Tom will not have the same experience of the farm and farming life. Janice and Tom will ascribe different meanings to both the past and the future possibilities. Farm women, like Janice, often have quite different experiences of farm life from their husbands and tend to feel more ambivalence about encouraging their children to remain on the farm. During the crisis of the 1980s, many wives of farmers became the primary breadwinners in the family by taking nonfarming jobs while their husbands worked to keep the farm afloat. Women often question the sacrifices of time and health involved in farming. They recognize, often more quickly than men, the toll that farm life can take on loved ones and family. As in other social arenas, women’s work on family farms can easily go unrecognized and undervalued.

As the pastor enters the conversation about the future of the farms, the farm families, and the farm community, she or he will want to listen for the way each person frames the narrative of the past, the present, and the future in terms of their life in this place, remembering that stories about the place are also narratives about themselves. Care will involve helping persons see how their narratives share common threads and discussions about the values those threads represent. Empowerment to affect the future positively, in line with articulated values and a sense of who one is, will involve new insights into the master narratives of the culture. While some of the cultural norms that

frame identity and place will be deep and resistant to change, we are not completely determined by them; there is always a range of possibilities for identity construction. Reconciling relationships often involves acknowledging the way in which we are made by the people with whom we share our lives. In this case, for example, Michael and his father, Tom, may want to talk about what “home” means to them, or what they have learned from each other and the land about being “hard-working” and “self-sacrificing.” An astute pastor will be able to foster these conversations in ways that invite listening with a desire to understand the other, rather than change the other. The listening itself will be a step toward meaningful change. Additionally, a pastoral caregiver will assist Janice, Tom, Michael, and the whole community in remembering that this is not only about relationship to self, others, and land but about the relationship to God as well. There is always a spiritual aspect to identity, and the church is the context in which we should be able to explore who we are in relation to God. Pastoral care will involve placing the narratives of the culture and these individuals in conversation with the narratives of the Christian tradition.

### PLACE IN A THEOLOGICAL FRAME

What theological and spiritual questions are raised by the situation described in this chapter so far? What resources exist in the Christian faith to address these questions? Place is a central category in Christian faith, though not always articulated as such. A quick recollection of biblical story brings to mind the centrality of “the promised land” in the Hebrew Bible or the “journey to Jerusalem” in the New Testament. Divine/human encounter takes place in a place, and the place matters. God is not limited to one place or another, but God is always experienced in a place. This place might be a church or a forest, but the place matters and it is not simply incidental to the experience. The place itself influences the character of the encounter. In some circumstances the place becomes a symbol of God’s presence and activity in the world such that the place serves as a reminder and mediator of God’s grace. People return time and time again to some places, like churches or mountaintops, because they expect an encounter with God in that particular place. This is not to say that some places are sacred in and of themselves but that places become sacred in the dynamic relationship of God, creature (including human), and place.<sup>17</sup> If we are seeking to make God’s love and justice more apparent in the world, we must attend to the places we and others inhabit, doing what we can to make them more likely to facilitate spiritual and material experiences of God’s grace.

This chapter has suggested that people from small towns and rural areas have something to teach us about place in relation to Christian care, in terms

of both its gifts and its challenges. Within the larger questions of a theology of place, two particular areas emerge out of our discussion here: the relational interconnections between God, land, and humanity and the human need for “home.” The Andersons and their friends, and the people of other land-based communities, such as mining and logging, know something about the land that most others do not. Their knowledge is crucial for our theological understanding and spiritual/material well-being. Like no others, farmers have intimate knowledge of the processes and elements of the earth. They know too of the struggle to live dependent on the land and the economic and political forces of capitalism. Sharon Butala, a writer from rural Canada, suggests that it is life lived close to nature and the land that marks rural life, and the yearning that farmers have to “save the farm” is in fact a yearning born out of deep knowledge that “in lives lived out on the land and in nature, we preserve the essence of what it is to be human.”<sup>18</sup> We agree with her that we cannot afford to lose the practical wisdom that has been passed down through generations of farmers, and add that this wisdom of the earth is also a practical wisdom of God. Butala puts it this way: “In a larger sense the physical closeness to Nature is a closeness of the unseen forces that rule the universe; in the landscape there is always the unrealized awareness of the edge of existence, of the mystery of being.”<sup>19</sup>

Christians proclaim God as creator and source of all life. God brought and continues to bring the earth and its creatures into being. As contemporary theologians and scientists have made clear, we live in a deeply interrelated dynamic organic web. God’s spirit moves through this web, creating us in, for, and of relationship with the earth and all its creatures. We are deeply dependent on one another. First, we live because the earth lives. As many have said, the earth is our “home.” We are created in partnership with the earth. We are nurtured and sustained by the earth, and the earth needs our care in order to be a creative and nurturing home for us and otherkind. Many theologians have turned their attention to land and ecotheology. One of those, Sallie McFague, points out that our sin in relation to the earth is that we “refuse to accept our place” in the larger scheme of things.<sup>20</sup> We refuse to see our own dependence and the limitation of our power to control. The land and the earth’s processes continually make those two things abundantly clear.

If we want to make a difference in the quality of Earth Community, the most helpful thing we could do, according to Michael Pollan and others,<sup>21</sup> would also increase our sensitivity to land. One suggestion is that we all grow a bit of the food we eat. This is a fairly simple thing to do, but in fact it would persuade us of our ultimate dependency on the natural world of which we are a part. One March day a group of us planted spinach, radishes, shallots, and bibb

lettuce. The day was blustery with a threat of snow, and the rest of the next three weeks didn't look much nicer. We worried. Would the plants emerge? What would encourage them to break the soil? Not much. During that three weeks, we became very persuaded of the limits of our efforts and the miracle of the soil and seeds. When the plants emerged, it was a miracle. We were reminded of what farmers know: we are all dependent on soil and God.

There are any number of other land issues that rural peoples are particularly aware of. One is simply: Who owns, and who works, the land? Do they care about the quality of food grown there, of life lived there? Who controls the use of land? Another is the quality of the natural world in the neighborhood: the quality of water, the arability of the soil, the extent of erosion and runoff. Another is the movement of peoples into and out of the land: migrant workers, resident immigrants, youth, and so on. What is the quality of life around that place? How does the local government view the land? Is natural capital an issue for them? What is the sense of public land? Is land accessible to poor people?

Certainly those who live in the midst of the land have a stake in its well-being. But then, so do all those who depend on land for healthy food, for clean air, for good water. So do those who care about the distribution of a sufficient quality of life for all on the land. So do all those who care about health and the land's long-term sustainability. Agrarian communities remind the church to think theologically about the earth, and it is important for the church to work with agrarian peoples to articulate a theological understanding of the land. Church leaders, then, must work with congregations to put our theological commitments into action.<sup>22</sup>

Another aspect of the interrelationship between God, earth, and humankind is the healing power of nature. It is not only our physical health that is at stake here, but our spiritual and emotional health as well. Many suggest that we have an intrinsic need for closeness to nature. Overdeveloped urbanization may have left this need largely unfulfilled for many in this country. Health geographers and environmental psychologists have consistently found that just being outside can improve mood, reduce stress, raise self-esteem, and increase creativity.<sup>23</sup> Many spiritual traditions, especially those of indigenous peoples, stress the importance of nature and nature's ability to connect us to God. Well-known pastoral counselor and teacher Howard Clinebell developed a model of pastoral counseling based in ecotherapy and ecoeducation and an "earth-grounded" understanding of the human person. In this model, individual well-being is enhanced in three ways: "by becoming more fully, intentionally and regularly nurtured by nature, by becoming more aware of the larger

meanings of their place in nature and the universe (ecological spirituality), and by becoming more involved in nurturing nature by active earth-caring”<sup>24</sup>

It might seem odd that we suggest that rural farmers may be people to turn to for wisdom about ecospirituality and the healing power of God through nature. Farmers themselves might think that this not something they know anything about, or care to know about. We often see farmers, or miners, or loggers as those who most exploit the earth. Yet family farmers are a source of wisdom because of the struggle they have with the land, between the need to make a living and feed the people, and a deep respect for the land itself. Few ecotheologians draw on the experience of farmers to develop a theology of land. Those who present a reading of nature as all quiet, peace, and harmony do not remember the havoc and destruction of blizzard or tornado. Nature is much more complex, as spirituality should be, than the lake and forest in the landscape painting suggests. Indigenous spiritual traditions seem to grasp this ambiguity in the ways of the earth, and the ways of God, more readily than we. God, through the processes, brings both the snowstorm and the miracle of the first bloom of spring. Rural pastors need to be able to help those who work close to the land develop a theological language for the work they do and to see their closeness to the land as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

A caring minister might want to engage in conversation with Tom, Janice, and others in the community about how they experience God in relation to the land. Do they think of themselves as keepers of the earth’s resources? How does their farming nourish their relationship with God? How have changes in farming over the years fostered or diminished their connection to the earth, to God? In what ways is farming God’s work? Can the work that Michael is planning to do also be seen as God’s work? In what way can being raised close to the land support Michael in his new direction? Many times even religious communities do not engage in this kind of theological language for their own circumstances, but doing so can enrich the sense of God’s presence and activity in their lives.

The second area for theological reflection that springs from our discussion of place is the human need for a place called “home.” Struggles over population changes, losses in rural farming communities, and gains in scenic recreation communities raise questions for the church about the meaning of “home” and the need of people for a place to belong. Many geographers, philosophers, and theologians suggest that people need to have a sense of rootedness, but rootedness is disrupted by the mobility of the postmodern world. The meaning of home and attachment to place might have changed given new virtual realities, but we are nevertheless embodied, enplaced human beings who are

always located somewhere. We seek locations that make us feel as if we are connected, as if we belong, as if we mattered. When we have a sense of being at home, in the right place at the right time, we have a glimpse of *shalom*, where God's peace, justice, and love reign. Unfortunately the places where people live are not always homes, as in when they are places of abuse or inadequate protection from disease; but Christians are called to create a world where house and home are one.

In a moving account of return to her roots in the Kentucky hills, bell hooks describes the necessity and ambiguity of that place called "home." When she left the rural South, she found material well-being but always felt out-of-place, a black country girl in the city. In many ways the home of her childhood was a place of oppression and violence, but at the same time the hills of Kentucky and the agrarian life were a place of safety and nurture. hooks suggests that "without the space to grow food, to commune with nature, or to mediate the starkness of poverty with the splendor of nature, black people experienced profound depression."<sup>25</sup> Home in nature was a site of resistance. She claims that "black folks" need to be called back to their agrarian past, in order to remember and experience their home in the realm of God.

Christian tradition points to home as a place on earth and in heaven, in the now and in the yet-unrealized future. It is something we hope for and in hoping make real. To be home is to be at one with God, resting in the awareness of God's ever-present love. hooks describes this longing for home.

All my life I have searched for a place of belonging, a place that would become home. Growing up in a small Kentucky town, I knew in early childhood what home was, what it felt like. Home was the safe place, the place where one could count on not being hurt. It was the place where wounds were attended to. Home was the place where the me of me mattered. Home was the place I longed for it was not where I lived . . .

"Nature was the intimate companion of girlhood. When life inside the concrete house was painful, unbearable, there was always the outside. There was always a place for me in nature."<sup>26</sup>

The church must ask: How do we foster homes for all people? How do we foster a sense of belonging not just for some, but for all? We must attend to those who feel out of place in the places where we feel most at home. Perhaps it is our dependence on and connection to the earth that can be a beginning for developing this kind of belonging. In and through the land we can learn of

our deep interconnection to God and all creation and find that we do indeed “belong,” in the sense that we have a unique and valuable place in the universe. In and through the land, we can learn what it means to be both dependent and yet individual, to be both secure and yet conscious of the possibility that storm and chaos may erupt at any time. To have a home, or to feel at home, does not require a particular place or particular family constellation; it does require a sense of safety, respect, physical and spiritual well-being, and being known by others. The longing for home that many feel is in some sense a longing for God.

This longing for home, for God, is present in all of us, even those of us who have a sense of being at home in the world. The realm of God is never fully realized and persons are never fully all that they can be—thus the longing that keeps us seeking and growing. If Tom and Janice have experienced their town as home, and if in general it feels that they do belong where they are, they might also be encouraged to remember the moments when it has not felt so welcoming or when they have felt out-of-place in their own hometown. These kinds of memories can help them see alternatives that Michael may be pursuing. Perhaps even Michael still calls this town “home,” and knowing that he has such a place gives him the confidence to move into unknown places.

There are two other ways that thinking of making a place home as a spiritual practice and the longing for home as a longing also for God can impact a community like this Midwest farming community. Tom and Janice and others in the congregation might want to begin attending to those young adults who do stay. How is the community providing a good home for them? Additionally, they might want to think about those who live in the community but feel out of place, as if they do not belong—those for whom the community is a place to live, but not a home. How might Tom and Janice and others in the church turn their attention to changing that reality? Some people may have lived their whole lives in that town and still not feel that they belong there. One way to respond to the crisis of changing economic realities and population decline might be to seek the kin-dom<sup>27</sup> of God by letting the earth wisdom of the community be the base for a new kind of home-making.

### PRACTICING CARE

Care in the situation described at the beginning of this chapter will include care for each individual in the Anderson family, for the family as a whole, and for the whole community. Because of the importance of place, the realities of farming and declining population, the personal, political, and spiritual significance of the land, we can see that care in this situation requires movements of care

toward personal well-being for the people involved and movements of social transformation toward the well-being of this whole community. As the pastor sits down at the picnic table to join in this discussion, the first awareness must be *where* this conversation is happening; in other words, let the spirit of God through the land be acknowledged. The fact that the concern raised by the families gathered here is directly related to the place in which the conversation is occurring suggests that the location, the surroundings themselves, have a role in the story and in the care. At some point in the conversation Steven, the pastor, may want to turn the attention of the group to the actual ground beneath their feet, the landscape, and the built spaces around them. These places carry symbolic meaning and connections to the wisdom and healing power of God; but Steven will need to help the group open up the narratives attached to these places, asking about what is not said, what is excluded, making sure that the story is not one-sided, for example, reciting only the idealized or romanticized story without the struggle and ambiguity. Could the changes in their families and town be seen as a continuation rather than a rejection of a tradition?

Also crucial to care in this situation is to place the personal story of Michael, for instance, in the context of the larger economic situation that allows everyone to see the way external powers are shaping, constraining, and opening up choices for these young adults. In an over-individualized culture such as the United States, there is a tendency to see family or personal struggles as residing primarily in the character of the persons involved, which then focuses the response on the change needed within those persons. As this chapter has pointed out, the struggle to “stay or leave” is a developmental challenge that arises out of the current state of agricultural economy driven largely by powers external to local small towns. Pastor Steven may need to be the voice of conscientization, which can expand the focus to include social struggles.

All levels, persons, families, and community are experiencing change and loss. One of the healing tasks will be to grieve those losses and to do so without overly romanticizing the past. Another task ahead will be to empower the persons, families, and community to see themselves as agents of hope and transformation. This requires a realistic assessment of where power lies, how power is operating, and in what ways the people at this table have the capacity for effecting change in a direction that they believe will move toward God’s vision for life on earth. The pastor can facilitate this assessment and assist in creating a narrative of hope for the future of these families and this community. One place to start reconstructing a story of the future may be to think with them about what God has revealed to them about creativity and change in

the face of loss and decline as they and their ancestors have farmed the land. What season is it for this place? What kind of home for future generations can and should this place be? Actively participating in creating a future for the community can be a path to reconciliation within families. As the families at the picnic table begin to acknowledge their own identity struggles, their grief, their fears, and their hopes for the future, they can move into actively creating a future of healing and transformation.

## Notes

1. In Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, Short Introductions to Geography (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 8.
2. Cresswell, *Place*.
3. Keith Halfacree, "Rural Space: Constructing a Three-Fold Architecture," in *Handbook of Rural Studies*, ed. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden, and Patrick Mooney (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).
4. Ibid.
5. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, *A House of Prayer for All Peoples: Congregations Building Multiracial Community* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002).
6. Ibid.
7. Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 2.
8. For a substantiation of these claims, see Shannon Jung, *Hunger & Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009).
9. Patrick J. Carr and Maria Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon, 2009).
10. Stephanie Taylor, *Narratives of Identity and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
11. Ibid., 131.
12. David Mark Hummon, *Commonplaces: Community Ideology and Identity in American Culture*, SUNY Series in the Sociology of Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).
13. Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision*, new ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press/San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 2008), 239.
14. See Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008).
15. James J. Ponzetti Jr., "Growing Old in Rural Communities: A Visual Methodology for Studying Place Attachment," in *Journal of Rural Community Psychology* (2003).
16. Carolyn Norris-Baker and Rick J. Scheidt, "On Community as Home: Places That Endure in Rural Kansas," in *Home and Identity in Late Life International Perspectives*, ed. Graham D. Rowles and Habib Chaudhury (New York: Springer, 2005).
17. For discussions about "place" as sacred, see John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology* (Aldershot, UK/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, expanded ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).
18. Sharon Butala, "The Myth of the Family Farm," in *Farm Communities at the Crossroads: Challenge and Resistance*, ed. Harry P. Diaz et al. (Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2003), 72.

19. Ibid., 73.

20. McFague, *The Body of God*, 112.

21. Ibid.

22. For more along these lines, see L. Shannon Jung, *Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); *Hunger and Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009).

23. Craig Chalquist, "Ecotherapy Research and a Psychology of Homecoming," in *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, ed. Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist (Berkeley, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2009).

24. Howard John Clinebell, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth: A Guide to Ecologically Grounded Personality Theory, Spirituality, Therapy, and Education* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 63.

25. bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38.

26. Ibid., 215

27. Kin-dom is an alternative to the term "kingdom" that stresses the interconnection of all life rather than the hierarchical relationship of ruler and subject. In the kin-dom of God we know ourselves as "kin" to one another.