Strategic Storytelling for Small Towns:
How Narrative Therapy Can Help Us Understand the Reinvention of Rural America

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“Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.” — Jean Luc Godard
Introduction

The Collapse of the Old Narrative
Narrative Therapy
Why am I friends with Alex?

Why do I buy Apple or Patagonia?

Construction of “meaning”
Parts of a Narrative

Key Events
What are the important things that happened in this version of the story?

Values
"Demonstrated"
What motivated the main character in this story?

Alternative Interpretation
Are there other values that could explain how events unfolded?

Artifacts
What gives tangible evidence to support the alternative?
Example of Life Change

**Career Shift**

Think of how the same jobs and same life achievements now become part of a new story.

**New story emerges**

You and your counselor explore and watch to see what storyline starts to emerge and give you new energy or sense of direction.
Authentic

Cannot be dropped in from outside

Character Arc

Builds on history, not a radical leap

Ownership

Therapist cannot solve it for you (not sustainable)
How It Applies to Small Towns
Why am I friends with Alex?

Why do I buy Apple or Patagonia?

Why am I living in (or moving to) Smallville vs Metropolis?
In each case we tell a story

**Patagonia**
- Founding by Chouinard, the spirit of cooperation
- Leaving business to his employees.

**Smallville**
- What makes this town different / special?
- Where are they headed?
- What kind of people like to come here / live here?
04

The Curve-Fitting Problem
Sundown town
  • Maybe we want to focus on a story about evolving to become a center of cultural diversity.

Saddlehorse history
  • Maybe we want to go full on as a historical site.

Firebrick industry
  • Or, maybe we want to develop a story around being a hub of engineering (not just in one industry).
Where do recent changes fit in?

*Renovation of Performing Arts Center*

*Upgrade to Aquatic Center*

Can feel like writing random chapters without being clear how they fit together or where they are going.
05

Success & Failure
+ Main Street Marketplace  
   Corning, New York
+ Faneuil Hall  
   Boston, Massachusetts
- SteamTown Mall  
   Scranton, Pennsylvania
- Denver Stadium Area  
   Denver, Colorado
Beyond Narrative
Remembering When We Are On Stage

Telling the story vs. Working Backstage

We tend to forget there are two different roles and it undermines the audience’s ability to be drawn into the story.
Need for Meta-narrative

Beyond a story for THIS or THAT town:

Why revive any or all small towns?

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What makes them more than a quaint memento we should let go of?
Conclusion