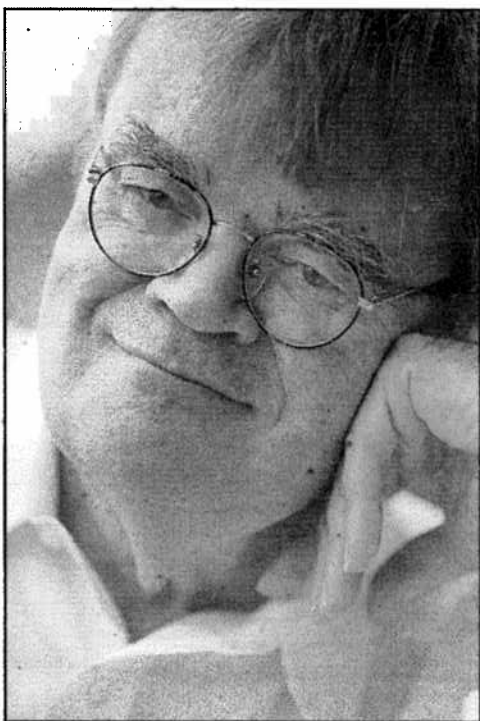


THE OLD SCOUT

Garrison Keillor

EARTH AND FOOD

Peter Schwartzman

The silent brotherhood

I travel around a LOT — too much, but one does learn things from spending time in the company of strangers, such as the fact that too many young American men suffer from a desperate lack of social skills.

I'm not talking about dancing the tango and ordering wine and engaging in witty repartee, just the simple art of extending yourself in a friendly manner to someone you don't know, which is crucial in any job in which you brush up against the great unwashed public. (Or in politics, or spreading the gospel, or simply living a rich life in multivarious America.) Over and over and over, you run into young men with the personalities of warehouse security guards.

Young women get the hang of this more easily. They're able to bring personal warmth to professional duties and greet the weary traveler in a way that instantly makes you love Hilton hotels, or wherever you're spending the night. So many young men, on the other hand, seem to be in severe pain in their blue blazers. They dread your approach across the hotel lobby and they look at their shoes and say, "Yeah?" as you stand there, hoping to find out where the business center is.

What happened? Are these sullen boys the victims of feminism, marginalized, repressed, just because they have testicles? Are they on powerful medications? Maybe the prevalence of texting among the young is making them inarticulate.

The Pew Research Center tells us that 75 percent of the 12-to-17 crowd have cell phones, and more than half of them text-message every day, 50 messages a day on average, but many of them send a hundred or more. Three hundred is not unusual. The study by Pew says, "There's now an expectation that teens will contact each other via text, and they expect a kind of constant, frequent response."

If you sit in the library after school, text-messaging to people across the room ("Hey, whassup? RUOK? :-) L8R"), you've successfully eliminated 98 percent of the nuance of face-to-face dialogue, the delicious nuance and also the awkward stuff, like when you send a big textual hug ("((H))") to people you've never actually put your arms around — you've skipped some essential steps in gaining intimacy.

If you don't pick up the fine art of small talk — those little jokey exchanges with the bus driver, the security guy, the cleaning lady, the newsstand guy, the waiter, the bartender — you're missing one of the pleasures of life and narrowing your world

severely, as if you'd taken vows of silence in the Order of Yo Bro.

If you resort to e-mail for any difficult communication ("Dear Meghan, I am sorry but after our big fight about cleaning the bathroom last Wednesday I have fallen in love with someone else and I am really, really sorry, but also I am happier than I've ever been in my life. Goodbye. Andrew."), you are in retreat from reality, and this is a strategy that only has a bad outcome. You will learn nothing from it. And a person should never pass up a free education.

People smarter than I have written about the difference in socialization of young men and young women: women wired to form close interpersonal relationships as a step toward romance, intimacy, a stable family life within a tight-knit support system, and men wired to beat other men senseless with clubs and seize the big butt of the wild swine carcass and thereby win the loyalty of the large-breasted, blue-eyed babe who is wired to mate with a winner, not a loser.

All of that is true, I'm sure, but I'm not looking at the big picture here, just the small daily aspects of life, which lend it savor and tunefulness and chewability. That includes free-form, rambling, open-hearted conversation. Sometimes you find it in bars, sometimes on airliners, sometimes after church, at coffee hour. It is fundamental to a sense of belonging in the world. Basic confidence begins here.

We can talk L8R about bad spelling and whassup with the acronyms — my concern is that electronics, which seem to open up new vistas in the world, may be shutting us down. Put down that cell phone, good sir, and look me in the eye and tell me something. How are you? Good. I like those tattoos. And the big safety pin in your ear. You from here? No? You're from Oklahoma? Really? Where the waving wheat can sure smell sweet when the wind comes right behind the rain? Cool. Awesome. Totally.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of "77 Love Sonnets," published by Common Good Books.)

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Lawns = missed opportunities

It isn't only one's lawn that should be growing now. Nature is abuzz with activity and fortunately we can join in on all the excitement too. All it takes is a little enthusiasm and some forethought.

Lawns are everywhere and so it seems that we prefer them over all other uses of our land. But have we considered other options? As you contemplate what you are going to do with any land you might have access to this spring, have you considered any of the following: Do you want to mow weekly for the next ~25 weeks? Would you like to be able to eat fresh, healthy vegetables this summer and fall? Would you like to increase the diversity of life found on this planet and in your neighborhood? Is the future of bees of interest to you? Do you want your yard to be non-toxic? Do you want to learn about nature and get a deeper appreciation of Earth's life forms? Do you care (perhaps too much or too little depending on your neighbors) what your neighbors think about what you choose to do with your land?

These are a lot of questions but all are relevant in making an informed decision. The default in our community is to grow grass, have it mowed regularly, and to treat it with synthetic pesticides. And while this might be the "easiest" thing for people to do, it is very much an unfavorable decision in other ways. A chemically-treated green lawn may be the most dominant form of yard today, but it suffers greatly in terms of diversity (meaning fewer kinds of plants, animals, insects, and birds as well as fewer colors and shapes) and toxicity (as the pesticides so widely used are highly dangerous—remember they are made to kill life). But perhaps the most overlooked weakness of a "green" lawn is a loss of opportunity—to learn (about nature and our relationship to it), to create (as in unique colors, shapes and textures), and to taste (as in food that could be produced).

Sure, a lawn is great if you want to play ball on it, but, otherwise, a lawn is quite wasteful, especially in the Midwest where the soil is often so rich. With a little bit of effort, one can convert part of a lawn into a

diverse system of flowers or food crops. Both will provide more resources for bugs (and therefore birds) as well as for us, assuming we take the time to admire the beauty of variegated petals or the succulence of a freshly grown tomato or strawberry. Stir-fried okra with tomatillo soup (two dishes I ate quite often last summer) can turn your household into a five-star restaurant (at one-star prices too!). Freshly cut flowers put on the dining room table or delivered to an ailing friend can really boost one's outlook. The possibilities are really endless.

So many yummy foods can grow in this climate and when you grow them yourself you have more control over what is (and isn't) in your food or on those flowers. For example, there is no need to spray pesticides on your crops either. There are many natural substances that can ward off most "pests" and weeding can be quite relaxing if you do it when the sun is low in the sky. Many "weeds" are even edible (such as purslane and lamb's quarters); just one more thing to learn and taste the fruits of one's knowledge.

What one decides to do with in one's yard is a personal decision (within certain limits as dictated in city ordinances), so ultimately it comes down to one's priorities. If one could access one's intellect, heart and stomach simultaneously, I think food and diversity would trump a drab and largely sterile lawn. As in many other areas of our lives, convenience often wins out. Perhaps this spring will be the year that more of us decide to reorient ourselves and get busy launching the growth of food and diversity rather than mere green. (If you need seeds, let me know by email: thecenteringalesburg@gmail.com). I've got great seeds to share.)

This week's garden tips: (1) *Make a great watering pitcher:* take a plastic juice container (48 or 64 oz.), make sure it's one with a screw off plastic lid; puncture hole in lid top with screwdriver; (2) *Plant early or late season crops* (e.g., lettuce, carrots, potatoes, swiss chard, cabbage, broccoli) to avoid working long hours in the intense sunlight/heat of summer.

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