Also by Paul Gruchow

Journal of a Prairie Year
The Necessity of Empty Places
Minnesota: Images of Home
Travels in Canoe Country

Grass Roots:
The Universe of Home

Paul Gruchow

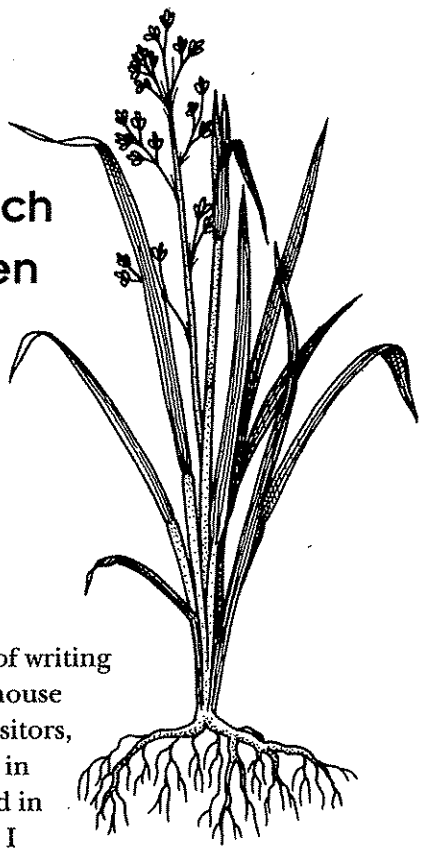
Also by Paul Gruchow

Journal of a Prairie Year
The Necessity of Empty Places
Minnesota: Images of Home
Travels in Canoe Country

Grass Roots:
The Universe of Home

Paul Gruchow

What We Teach Rural Children



I ONCE made the mistake of writing that I had grown up in a house without books or frequent visitors, cut off from the wider world in many ways—that I was raised in cultural isolation—and that I found solace in the wild places of our farm. Several readers of this account took me to be a kind of wolf boy, miraculously hauled, just in the nick of time, out of depravity and into civilization. This response surprised me. I hadn't imagined my life in such dire and dramatic terms; I had felt, actually, fairly civilized all along.

When I described the loneliness in my life—I called it the silence—I was not thinking of the scarcity of books in our house, much as I yearned for them. Nor did I have in mind the material simplicity of our existence. I was thinking, rather, about the rural community into which I was born but which had collapsed by the time I was a teenager, a decline heightened for me, no doubt, by the fact that we moved out of it during the dawning of my pubescence.

The move was toward prosperity. On the strength of a small inheritance, my parents had accumulated the capital to buy a place of their own after years of tenant farming. The new farm lay just a few miles west in the next township; we had not yet measured the psychological distance. The place not only belonged to us, but it had a house of seven ample rooms with tall windows and was in decent repair, unlike the three cramped and tumbledown rooms we had been used to. On winter mornings in that old house, we sometimes found drifts of powdery snow that the wind had driven through the cracks and that the kerosene stove had failed to melt. Our sturdy new house, seated on a lovely green bluff, was palatial by comparison. We had improved our station but not, it soon became clear, our lot in life. We had left our old neighborhood without moving into another. Our new neighbors were welcoming and kind; this was not an issue of civility. We had, rather, come up against a difficulty of timing.

One Sunday after the noon meal, we children were summoned to a rare family conference. "We have something to tell you," my mother said, looking strangely radiant, "but it is a secret, and you are not to tell anyone. Do you understand?"

"Yes," my sister and I said. "We understand. We won't tell."

"Remember, this is a secret," she said.

"Yes, yes," we said.

"Well," she said, "your father and I want you to know that we are going to have a baby. When winter comes, you will have a new little brother or sister. Isn't that wonderful? But this is a secret between us for now. Okay?"

"Okay!" we said, dancing with glee. We could hardly wait for Mother and Father to take their Sunday nap. (We had not yet discovered the connection between Sunday naps and new babies.) The instant they had settled down, we crept out the door, rushed to the next farm, and summoned the children.

"We have a secret," we said. "We have a secret." We stubbed our toes in the dirt, trying to look mysterious.

"Tell us! Tell us!"

What could we do, pressed as we were? "But don't tell anybody else," we said.

By nightfall it was common knowledge in the neighborhood: "The Gruchows are expecting. Next winter." That was in the 1950s.

We moved, as it happened, in the early 1960s, when the first fruits of farm industrialization had come to harvest. Consolidation was the word of the hour. Land holdings were being consolidated. The farmstead closest to our new house was vacant and growing up with weeds. The one across the section had already been razed and put to production. Schools were being consolidated, too. The rural neighborhood schools were the first to go, then the village schools. My great-grandfather had retired to a village just across the river valley that we could see from our front doorstep, but its school was already closed, as was almost everything else in the village, except the municipal bar, which did—perhaps not coincidentally—a booming business. We children had once only a hundred

yards to walk to our district schoolhouse. Now we trudged through the winter darkness to the stop a quarter mile away where we caught the bus for the long haul to the nearest city school. Even rural churches could not escape consolidation. We continued after our move to attend church in our old neighborhood; there wasn't one in Tunsberg Township. There were no children our age within walking distance. They were by then disappearing from our old neighborhood, too. Had our family conference taken place in the 1960s, the news of the baby would likely have remained a secret. The gossip by then, in any case, was of acquisitions, not of pregnancies.

After our move we were not lonely because we were poor or because we lived in a house without books. We were lonely because we no longer lived in a community. We had moved, for all practical purposes, into an industrial park. Neither were we lonely because we lived primitively. On the contrary, we lived at the cutting edge of modernity.

In the decade of my coming of age, millions of farm dwellers left the land and sought new lives in towns and cities, not because that was what they desired but because they had no alternative. This removal constituted one of the greatest mass migrations in history. Wendell Berry has encapsulated it in the memorable phrase, "the unsettling of America."

If you grew up on a farm in the last fifty years, as I did, and were at all alert to what was happening there, you could not have missed the steady attrition of all kinds. You would have seen the empty farmhouses, the barns rotting and falling in on themselves, the pink trailer houses on concrete blocks replacing two-story houses with veranda porches. You would have noticed the diminishing songbirds, the disappearing butterflies,

the vanishing potholes, the uprooted fencerows, the balding hilltops. You would have watched schoolhouses become township halls, their playgrounds grown up with weeds. You would have known that they were standing empty not only because there were bigger schools elsewhere but also because there were fewer children. You would have seen the arithmetic that went into the grocery lists your mother made on the backs of envelopes; you would have seen the rows of items with their prices and the sums at the bottom, and you would have observed that items had been crossed out to make the family's needs equal its resources, not the other way around. You would have seen the empty churchyards. Only the cemeteries remained, odd temples of death jutting out of cornfields. You could still be buried in the countryside, but you could no longer be baptized there.

If you listened to the radio or read the newspapers or asked your vocational agriculture instructor at the high school to explain what was happening, you would have learned that the United States was experiencing a modern miracle in the world's most efficient agriculture, a way of farming so slick and fine that it didn't need people anymore, or soils, or birds, or schoolhouses, or children. All the miracle required was more petroleum and bigger tractors and more land.

And you would have counted up, taken stock. If you were at all bright, you could have read the bottom line. You would have realized that you were among the items no longer needed: you, or your parents, or your cousins, or the neighbors down the road. The miracle being celebrated was your own obsolescence.

American agriculture settled after the Second World War into a wearyingly rapid pattern of booms and busts. After every bust you heard the same easy explanation

from the government analysts and the bank and the farm economists. America, they said, has been burdened with too many farmers. This latest bust has been painful, to be sure, they said, but also necessary and, in the long run, beneficial. We have been weeding out the poor and inefficient operators, they said. They did not say this—economists rarely speak so bluntly—but they meant it: We have been clearing the human trash out of farming. We have been making the countryside safe for machines.

Ours was a community, mainly, of second- and third-generation Germans and Norwegians. In the year of my birth it was still possible to attend a Norwegian-language church service, and the German prisoners of war who had been pressed into service as farm laborers had only recently departed. But our schools taught neither language and offered instruction in neither culture. We were to suppose that the Italian autoworkers of Detroit, the Polish beermakers of Milwaukee, and the Norwegian farmers of western Minnesota were culturally indistinguishable, that ethnicity was, if it was anything at all, a private matter of no consequence to the community.

We were also to suppose that there was no such thing in America as class. We all knew where the railroad tracks ran and who lived on which side of them, but in the classroom or in the pulpit nobody ever tried to articulate for us the difference between James J. Hill of St. Paul and Nobody Hill of Montevideo.

The suppression of difference among whites has had the paradoxical effect of accentuating it in poisonous ways. If we imagine that whites are homogeneous, then we are free to magnify the differences between whites and the rest of humanity; and we are also free either to glorify or to vilify white history but not to see it as merely one among many variations of the human story.

Manifest destiny and Western culture as the unique expression of patriarchal and racist rot are both readings of history from the same point of view: both assume that the Western story is in some unique way a radical departure from the human story.

I have recently been in the Platte River valley of Nebraska. A man there took me to see his German grandfather's homestead near Hastings in what is the state's richest agricultural region. He showed me a miles-long line of earth-sheltered bunkers, now crumbling like a prehistoric ruin. His grandfather's land, the man told me, had been seized by the United States government during World War II, along with that of hundreds of other German immigrant farmers, and turned into a vast ammunition depot. The farmers themselves were conscripted into the military. The best of their houses were moved to Hastings to make an officers' row; the rest were razed. Their families were left to cope as best they could, as were the farmers who returned home from the war, heroes but landless. His grandfather, my Nebraska guide told me, could never drive past that depot without ranting and cursing. He was bitter about it to his death.

There are many telling details in this story: that good land was taken when any land might have done; that the farmers displaced were Germans, surely not a coincidence; that the government, just as in the hundreds of domestic treaties with Native-American nations, was unilaterally breaking a promise; that after the war no effort was made to restore either the land or the community; and that this took place in Nebraska not despite its representatives in Washington but because one of them, Senator George Norris, had used his unusual influence to bring home a "development" plum.

But I am especially interested in a psychological detail with which the grandson now struggles. If it is true, as conventional wisdom currently has it, that white males are indiscriminately privileged in our culture, then how is this man to respond to what happened to his grandfather? There are only three possibilities, I think. One is to dismiss the grandfather as a weakling, somebody who could be stepped on and pushed around despite the advantages that society had offered him. The second is to appropriate his grandfather's rage and all that goes with it: a sense of malice against government, a declaration of fierce independence, and the bitter conviction that one will always, in the end, be taken. The third is to become a Good Boy, to atone for the grandfather's failure by taking the side of power. This third choice is the one the grandson seems to have made; he is now a veteran of both the Vietnam and Gulf wars and a devotee of military history, an enthusiasm his young son, he proudly reports, already shares.

His response is important because this is the story not just of a few German immigrants in the vicinity of Hastings, Nebraska nearly fifty years ago, but of the millions of farmers who have been forced from the land since the end of that war, always with the explanation that their work—their lives—were an impediment to the progress and prosperity of their society. If one were looking for the root causes of male violence in rural culture, this would seem to me a more revealing place to start than with the theories of patriarchal primacy that have such a hold on our imaginations.

None of the possibilities open to the grandson provides any psychological basis for community building. The first leads to the malaise of powerlessness, the second to the rejection of the authority of community, the third away from the sense of local pride that is at the heart of community. Struggle sometimes ennobles people, but never debasement.

The point is that rural children have been educated to believe that opportunity of every kind lies elsewhere and that the last half century's rural experience of failure and decline has been largely due to the incompetence, or irrelevance, of rural people.

The substance of this analysis finally came home to me as I listened to a lecture by a much honored geographer. He showed us a set of excellent slides recounting the triumphal march of agriculture from its mean beginnings in Indian plots to its present glory, the three-crop, cash-grain system, as he put it: corn, soybeans, and Miami. I thought it was already a tired joke the first time it was uttered, but the audience of rural schoolteachers snickered politely. The geographer showed us maps of corn belt townships from thirty years ago and from today. The old maps were messy and cluttered, a jangle of property lines. The new ones were neat and orderly, rid of the confusion of so many extraneous owners. Actually, the geographer assured us, the lines on the map might look even neater if one took into account the fact that the modern operator—the embarrassing word "farmer" is seldom used by such people—is as likely to rent land as to own it: a nice advance in capital efficiency. He showed us photographs of untidy old-time farm landscapes: fencerows everywhere, and farmsteads with their Victorian jumble of trees and houses and big old barns and chicken coops and pig sheds and granaries. And then he showed us photographs of nice modern farm landscapes: no unsightly fences, no unproductive trees, just big open fields of corn and soybeans stretching to the horizon, and maybe somewhere in the distance one

nice farmstead with a row of evergreens, a ranch-style house, a sleek, corrugated-metal pole shed to house the equipment—something clean and efficient.

The geographer lingered at one particular photograph of a man unloading shell corn into a metal grain bin. He wanted us to appreciate the marvel of it. He pointed out the two tractors that were rigged with auger and elevator to carry the grain from the truck to the bin in one simple, efficient maneuver. He pointed out that there was only one person in the picture and five machines: an elevator, an auger, a truck, and two tractors. He counted them for us. "Think of it!" he said, beaming. "Thirty years ago there would have been four or five people in this picture and maybe only one machine! All that labor just to store a load of corn!" He paused to let us appreciate the scene. I felt as though we were expected to applaud, although nobody did.

The geographer used the word "efficient" like a mantra. That was the meaning of his story, he said: the rise of efficiency. When he was finished, I asked him to tell us what he meant by that word.

He looked confused, and he hesitated. Finally he said, "Well, I could be clever, I suppose, and make up some definition on the spot, but the truth is, I haven't really given it much thought."

I went home, seething with anger, and wrote him a sharp letter. If you're a scholar with any moral integrity, I wrote, you'll give some thought to what you mean by the words you celebrate.

A few days later came his reply. "Thank you for the emotion you have obviously invested in your letter," it said. "I regret, however, to say that I have made it a rule to respond only to rational correspondents."

I know another man who once served on the

governing board of the institution that employs the geographer. He is a farmer without a degree from any school; he grew up in hard times and his parents needed him at home. He's not in *Who's Who,* has never presided over the meeting of any learned society, has never been invited by any foreign government to give a lecture, and has only one piece of writing to his name, a self-published chapbook of sentimental poems entitled "My Brother's Keeper."

I met him when I was the editor of the newspaper at the institution he helped govern. He took the trouble to get to know not only me but my parents, who were, partly by choice, left out of the industrial revolution in farming. They were among the people being weeded out. But my friend the farmer-poet cared about them. He stopped to see me every few weeks. Each time he stopped, he inquired politely about the progress of my newspaper and then asked me what I had published in it lately that honored and protected the lives of my people. I was never able to give him a satisfactory answer.

I left college and went on with my life. My parents died. But my friend did not forget me or them. He still telephones now and then or drops by for a visit. The last time I saw him, he showed up in the middle of a blizzard. He wanted to know, he said, what I was doing to honor and protect the lives of my people. I gave him an answer, but we both knew it was lame. I urged him to spend the night with us. The storm was raging. He could not stay, he said. He had to be at the hospital in the morning for open-heart surgery.

I don't imagine that I need to tell you which man strikes me as educated.

So here I am to do that man's bidding, to speak against any economy that sees people as an expendable

resource, that draws balance sheets excluding from consideration the health of the communities on which they report, that defines as efficient any reduction in human labor no matter what its nonpecuniary consequences. Such an economy is not only bound eventually to fail. It is wrong.

Richard Lingemann, who wrote a history of small towns, calls our Midwestern villages disposable communities. He means that many of them did not emerge organically in places well suited to the development of towns. Rather, they were often merely real estate speculations or projects of the railroads, whose financial fortunes, in the end, prospered, whatever the fate of the towns they promoted. The geographer John C. Hudson found that more than half of the railroad towns in North Dakota, for example, were by 1984 "little more than neighborhood gathering points for local farmers, with perhaps a gasoline station, a store and post office, a tavern or two, plus one or more grain elevators. Most merchants in the towns disappeared so long ago that younger residents never knew their trade centers as anything but a collection of decaying buildings. But the railroad network remains today much as it did sixty-five years ago. . . . Railroad profits and losses never were tied closely to the economic fortunes of the towns they served, even less so in later years when everything except grain moved on the highway."

Our belief is, as Hudson puts it, that structure can be made to precede activity. This idea failed in the utopian communities of the nineteenth century, it failed in the disposable communities of the plains, it failed in the urban housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s, it failed in the New Towns of the 1970s, and yet it persists. How many thousands of industrial parks have been built

along the edges of dying towns in recent decades, their empty streets cracking and heaving from freeze to freeze, their vacant lots sprouting pigweeds and cockleburs?

The idea that structure generates activity is a consequence of misapprehending technology, of regarding it not as a tool, but as an end in itself. Here are other examples of this idea at work in our culture: we can improve education by consolidating schools; we can make highways safer by designing them for higher speeds; we can solve urban blight by razing the neighborhoods that the poor live in and replacing them with more expensive units; we can reintegrate rural communities by installing fiber-optic links to the cities; we can reduce crime by building more prisons. The delusion in each of these instances is that individual or cultural behavior would change if only the right structure were in place.

The alternative is to think of entrepreneurial work as an option for our rural communities. I lived for fifteen happy years in Worthington, Minnesota, which bills itself as the Turkey Capital of the World. This is by now a sentimental label, since there is scarcely a turkey to be found in all of Nobles County. But the title once had some legitimacy. There was a thriving poultry industry at Worthington, fostered by two local hatchery men who enlisted the town's retailers and chamber of commerce in an ingenious promotion. Do your spring trade with us, they said to the region's farmers, and we'll give you a free chick for every dollar you spend. It was no gimmick. Everybody benefited: businesses saw more traffic, farmers received both the chicks and the income from the mature birds, and the poultry men eventually had a supply of turkeys and chickens for slaughter.

This scheme contributed to the establishment of the region around Worthington as an important national

center of poultry production, a diversification that helped to pull the community through the dark years of the Great Depression. By the 1940s the town had begun to celebrate turkeys in an annual harvest festival, sponsored by local merchants as a way of thanking their rural patrons.

The festival, which included a parade of turkeys, musical and carnival entertainments, and moonlight dancing in the streets, was so great a success that presidential aspirants began to flock to it to make their big farm-policy speeches: Estes Kefauver; Adlai Stevenson; Richard Nixon; Hubert Humphrey, who liked to flatter the townsfolk by noting that the only election he ever lost was the one in which he skipped Turkey Day; Lyndon Johnson, who sulked because the sky dared to rain on him; and Robert Kennedy, who drew a cheering throng of 80,000, the largest crowd, no doubt, that Worthington will ever see.

But disease eventually thinned the flocks, and after the Second World War, as farms expanded, they also became more specialized. Turkeys in Nobles County were always a small-scale diversification, and with the coming of export-driven industrialization, farmers no longer felt they could afford to be distracted by them. Turkey farming at Worthington, Minnesota, gradually became a thing of the past.

A few years ago, the town, battered by yet another bust in the farm economy, began to dream about what it might do to build on the tradition that had fostered its turkey industry. After due deliberation a scheme was announced, but it was not a fresh alliance between farmers and merchants to cooperate for the benefit of all. The new scheme was to erect a gigantic fiberglass turkey at the edge of town to lure passersby off the interstate in

the hope that they would drop a few bucks along the way. This, too, is part of the instruction we give our children.

What new work we make in the rural parts of our country these days is largely of the branch-manufacturing kind, assembling components or packing or canning: hard, monotonous, low paying. Rural Americans have attracted these jobs by selling themselves as cheap and undemanding and by putting up the cash to build the roads and sewers, construct the sewage treatment facilities, erect the buildings, and hire the additional police officers, court officials, and social workers that prove necessary in communities where people have neither satisfying work nor sufficient wages.

There are two ironies in these policies. First, our universities have recently discovered the evils of colonialism and are everywhere rewriting curricula to include this discovery, while simultaneously aiding and abeting the new colonialism of the countryside. The geographer I mentioned, for example, has recently published a paper in which he disputes, on the basis of some of his graduate students' work, the prevailing perception that small rural towns are dying. It may be true, he says, that many rural towns have lost their retail centers, but they have at the same time gained a host of manufacturing plants. The gains might be even greater, he observes—in the circumspect language of scholarship, of course—if rural towns weren't hampered by retrograde leaders unable to stomach change and get on with the program for progress. To me, there is a vast difference between entrepreneurial farming in a community that offers a full range of services and amenities and factory work eviscerating chickens under conditions that guarantee you carpal tunnel syndrome, for $6.50 an hour, in a town where you can't buy a

decent pair of shoes. The difference, to me, bears little resemblance to progress.

In any case, I hate that deceitful shibboleth about change, a favorite of social planners and progressive ministers. American farmers have been as receptive to technological change as any group in our society. They have come, in half a century, from horse power and a set of techniques essentially constant for more than a millennium to computers and bioengineering. Most of them have, in fact, changed themselves right out of existence. The pietists of change are those who would like to see more of the same. When one suggests that there may be better alternatives, they say, "Ah! There you go again, wallowing in the myths of the past!" We cannot change present policy, in other words, because to do so would be to resist change. It is not exactly a watertight argument, but it carries the day with depressing regularity.

The second irony is that, while industrialization has been sold as an escape from the hard labor of farming, it has brought an even harder and meaner kind of work, and at less potential for financial gain.

These are lessons we teach our rural children today: that their parents were expendable and that their duty is to abandon their dreams and to become cogs in the industrial machine.

Here is another message we give them, in ways both subtle and direct: if they expect to amount to anything, they had better leave home. The truth is, the future we are preparing for ourselves in rural America does not include a place for ambitious young men and women. A friend of mine who teaches at a rural university says that the institution ought frankly to offer a class called "How to Migrate."

When we sell ourselves, in the name of economic

development, as ideally suited to the least attractive kinds of factory work because our people are willing to labor hard and at subsistence wages without complaining or organizing, or when we allow the rest of society to dump its toxic trash in our land because we'll do anything for a few jobs, what are we telling our children about our ideals, our hopes and dreams?

Sometimes the message is more subtle: We are constantly putting down the professional person who chooses to work among us as less competent than the folks who have made it in the big cities. My wife's practice as a small-town defense attorney is an example. One night, when she was out for a meeting, the telephone rang. The caller was another professional woman in town, a friend. She was looking for Nancy. I said that she wasn't in. "Well," our friend said, "perhaps you can help me. That boy who's been charged with attempted murder—some of us are certain he's innocent. We're organizing a defense fund for him, and we need to hire an attorney."

"I'm not the lawyer," I said, "but Nancy will be back any minute, and I'm sure she'd be glad to help."

"You understand, of course," she replied, "how serious this charge is. We need to hire a real attorney, somebody from the Twin Cities."

She said it without the slightest intention, I'm sure, of putting my wife down. It's just an assumption we make: if you were any good, you wouldn't be here. What does that assumption, which is everywhere in the rural air, say to our children?

If you're any good, you go somewhere else. You go where good people go. We raise our most capable rural children from the beginning to expect that as soon as possible they will leave and that if they are at all successful, they

will never return. We impose upon them, in effect, a kind of homelessness. The work of reviving rural communities will begin when we can imagine a rural future that makes a place for at least some of our best and brightest children, when they are welcome to be at home among us. Only then will we be serious about any future at all.