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## *10½ Signs of Civic Success*



After about a year on the road, Deb and I had evolved a pattern for our first few days in a town. We would make an appointment together at the local newspaper, to start on a note of respect and to meet the people most likely to have been thinking analytically about positive and negative trends. Also, the viability of a local paper (or, in some cases, a local-news website) was itself an early and reliable guide to how much "there" there was to a town.

After we found a place to stay—downtown if possible, in cities where downtown revival efforts had reached that point; otherwise in a "suites"-style lodging on the edge of town—we would fan out. Deb would go to the library and the YMCA or similar sports and civic clubs; all of these are surprisingly still-relevant bellwether institutions. I would go to the economic-development office and the tech start-up zone and the community college. We'd both visit schools; we'd find the local brewpub or distilleries and talk with their founders and owners. In good weather, we'd walk in the parks or ride on the bike trails or go to minor league baseball games. In bad weather or at night, we'd go to the arts zones and galleries or the brewpubs again.

By the time we had been to half a dozen cities, we'd developed an informal checklist of the traits that distinguished a place where things seemed to work. These items are obviously different in nature, most of

them are subjective, and some of them overlap. But in our experiences, these things were true of the cities large or small that were working best:

1. *People work together on practical local possibilities, rather than allowing bitter disagreements about national politics to keep them apart.* We were traveling during the run-up to the bitter midterm elections of 2014, and then while the Supreme Court was ruling on same-sex marriage and Obamacare, and then as the 2016 presidential campaign, including the Trump insurgency, was gathering steam. People knew we were visiting from Washington, and some learned, by asking, that I had once worked for a Democratic president. Given the places we were traveling, I imagine that many of the people we interviewed were Trump supporters.

But it just didn't come up. Cable TV shows were often playing in the background, most frequently Fox News, and if people had stopped to talk about the TV fare, they might have disagreed with each other and with us. Yet overwhelmingly, the focus in successful towns was not on insoluble national divisions but on practical problems a community could address. The more often national politics came into local discussions, the worse shape the town was likely to be in.

2. *You can pick out the local patriots.* A standard question we'd ask soon after arrival was "Who makes this town go?" The range of answers varied widely. Sometimes it was a person in an official position of leadership, a mayor or city council figure. Sometimes it was a local business titan or a real estate developer. Sometimes a university president or professor, or a civic activist, or an artist or saloonkeeper or historian or radio personality. Sometimes a person with no official position but whose influence everyone felt.

What mattered was that the question *had* an answer. In one city in Appalachia, we asked a newspaper editor that question, and he said that no one came to mind but he would think about it overnight. In another southern city, the answer was the commanding officer at a nearby military base—but since the command rotated frequently, there was no permanent local patriot. The more quickly this question was answered, the better shape a town was in.

3. *The phrase "public-private partnership" refers to something real.* Through the years, I had heard about "public-private partnerships" but

had thought of this as just it was probably a euphemism and big business—the best fighter plane, for instance.

In successful towns, people do things like this. This is what a partnership means. A public school system including a poor neighborhood. The town is big enough to bring GE, BMW, and Michigan science fairs, at the competition. A large family-owned scrap-rerectional system to hire ex-reentering the work force. The city, county, and state are involved. In big cities, and several tech startups, the unemployed people in competition. Specifically a community of partnerships mean, the better.

4. *People know the civic life.* A town that understands, even if only through their guiding stories—California's sadly spoiled frontier, Vermont's

Successful cities seem to be just the right size: big enough to be smaller-town prairie can find but small enough to be livable which is much larger than big enough to make anything done. For Bend or attractive locations; for Pittsburghful turnaround; for Eastport the process of doing so. For turned on the importance of philanthropies, public art large number—in the Ru

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had thought of this as just another slogan. If it meant anything at all, it was probably a euphemism for sweetheart deals between big government and big business—the “public-private partnership” to build the latest fighter plane, for instance.

In successful towns, people can point to something specific and say, *This* is what a partnership means. In Greenville, South Carolina, the public school system includes an “Elementary School of Engineering,” in a poor neighborhood. The city runs the school; local industries including GE, BMW, and Michelin send in engineers to teach and supervise science fairs, at the companies’ expense. In little Holland, Michigan, a large family-owned scrap-recycling company works with the state correctional system to hire ex-convicts who would otherwise have trouble reentering the work force. In Fresno, California, a collaboration among the city, county, and state governments, the local colleges and universities, and several tech start-ups trains high school dropouts and other unemployed people in computer skills. The details vary, but the more specifically a community can explain what their public-private partnerships mean, the better.

4. *People know the civic story.* America has a “story,” one that everyone understands, even if only to say that it’s a myth or a lie. A few states have their guiding stories—California as either the ever-promising or the sadly spoiled frontier, Vermont as its own separate Eden.

Successful cities seem to have their stories, too. For Sioux Falls, that it’s just the right size: big enough so that people who have come from the smaller-town prairie can find challenge, stimulation, and opportunity, but small enough to be livable and comfortable. For Columbus, Ohio, which is much larger than Sioux Falls, that it, too, is exactly right-sized: big enough to make anything possible, small enough actually to get things done. For Bend or Duluth or Winters, that they are in uniquely attractive locations; for Pittsburgh, that it has set an example of successful turnaround; for Eastport or Allentown or Fresno, that they are in the process of doing so. For many of the cities we visited, the civic story turned on the importance of strong local institutions: libraries, schools, philanthropies, public arts projects, annual events. For a surprisingly large number—in the Rust Belt, in the South, in the Plains States, in

non-coastal areas of the West—it involved an awareness of being dismissed or disdained in the fashionable world's eyes, and thus being all the more determined to show what these people and this part of the country could really do.

As with guiding national myths, the question is not whether these assessments seem precisely accurate to outsiders. Their value is in giving citizens a sense of how today's efforts are connected to what happened yesterday and what they hope tomorrow will bring.

5. *They have downtowns.* This seems obvious, but it is probably the quickest single marker of the condition of a town. For a "young" country like the United States, surprisingly many cities still have "good bones," via the classic Main Street-style structures built from the late 1800s through World War II. In the mall-and-freeway decades after the war, some of these buildings were razed and many more were abandoned or disfigured with cheap aluminum fronts.

Most of the cities we visited were pouring attention, resources, and creativity into their downtowns. The Main Street America project, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has coordinated downtown revival projects in some two thousand communities across the nation. Of the ones we saw, Greenville's and Burlington's are the most advanced in this process, studied by planners from the rest of the world. San Bernardino's is still the furthest behind. Sioux Falls, Bend, Allentown, Fresno, Riverside, Holland, Rapid City, St. Marys, and many others mark points along the continuum. But downtown ambitions of any sort are a positive sign, and occupied second- and third-floor apartments and condos over restaurants and stores suggest that the downtown has crossed a decisive threshold and will survive.

6. *They are near a research university.* I feel bad even raising this point, because in contrast to all the others, there is very little a city can do to change its circumstances. It's not completely impossible, as central Oregon's long campaign to bring a branch of Oregon State University to Bend demonstrates. But it is both difficult and consequential because research universities have become the modern counterparts to a natural harbor or a location at a river confluence, in the economic benefits they confer.

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In the short term, they sustain demand by bringing in a student population. Over the longer term, they transform a town through the researchers and professors they bring in. It's obvious once you think about it, but is still striking to observe how powerfully a university academic staff can broaden the international diversity of a community and raise its median education level. When you find a Chinese or German physicist in the Dakotas or a Yale literature PhD in California's Central Valley, that person probably works for a university. Rapid City is different from other towns of its size on the prairie not simply because of Mount Rushmore (and the city's downtown street-corner array of life-sized bronze statues of all the U.S. presidents) but also because of the presence of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology.

And it's a cliché but true that research universities have become powerful start-up incubators. Stanford and its constellation of Internet ventures and Harvard and MIT with their biotech centers are merely the best-known examples of what you can see on the periphery of most other research universities. For instance: Clemson and the array of automotive-tech firms that have grown up around it in South Carolina, or UC Davis and associated agricultural-tech ventures.

7. *They have, and care about, a community college.* Not every city can have a research university. Any ambitious one can have a community college. And while research universities are the most important parts of the U.S. educational system from a global perspective, I've come to think that community colleges matter most domestically right now.

Just about every other world-historical trend is pushing the United States (and other countries) toward a less equal, more polarized existence: labor-replacing technology, globalized trade, self-segregated residential housing patterns, and the American practice of unequal district-based funding for public schools. Community colleges are the main exception, potentially offering a connection to higher-wage technical jobs for people who might otherwise be left with no job or one at minimum wage. East Mississippi Community College has taken people from welfare and prepared them for jobs in nearby factories that pay twice as much as the local median household income. Fresno City College works with local tech firms and California State University, Fresno, to train the children

of farmworker families (among others) for higher-tech agribusiness jobs. Obviously this does not end inequality, and badly run community colleges can make things worse by loading students with additional debt without improving their circumstances. Nationwide, only about 40 percent of those who start at a community college finish within six years. But we saw a number of such schools that were clearly forces in the right direction. The more often and more specifically we heard people talk about their community college, the better we ended up feeling about the direction of that town.

8. *They have distinctive, innovative schools.* Early in our stay, we would ask what was the most distinctive school to visit at the K–12 level. The question served a similar function to asking who in town made things run. If four or five answers came quickly to mind, that was a good sign. If not, the reverse.

The examples people suggested also ranged widely. Some were “normal” public schools. Some were charters. Some were special statewide public academies, like the Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities in South Carolina or the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences, in Columbus (both of them publicly funded boarding schools for high school students, with counterparts in many other states). Some were religious schools or private academies. The common theme was the intensity of experimentation. In political speeches, phrases like “our failed public school system” come so naturally that people barely notice. Across our country, we saw cities experimenting with schools that could succeed—and we noticed in the few places where that was not so.

9. *They make themselves open.* The anti-immigrant passion that inflamed the 2016 election cycle was not something people volunteered as a threat or problem in most of the cities we saw. On the contrary, politicians, educators, businesspeople, students, and retirees frequently stressed the ways their communities were trying to attract and include new people. Cities as different as Sioux Falls, Burlington, and Fresno have gone to extraordinary lengths to assimilate refugees from recent wars. Greenville’s mayor asked us to listen for how many different languages we heard spoken on the street, from residents or visitors.

Every small town in America has thought about how to offset the

natural brain-drain tendencies that young people elsewhere. The same things that make a town attractive to talented émigrés.

10. *They have big plans.* For the sake of ambitious “national greatness” projects, money; the only big efforts the government now counts as victory simply for NASA or NOAA, for health care, better or worse, it was a different state highways and went to the

Cities, because they *can* do things. A politician with a blueprint for the future from now, I think: Good luck! I don’t tend about long-term visions and a council shows me a map of how things will be when they’re completed, or what they like to come back.

Of course, there’s one other measure, the most reliable gauge. A city or town that brews beer, maybe more, and produces craft beer in 2014, that would have been a sign of a relatively outlawed craft beers by 2016 beer level. A generation earlier, it was not part of his administration’s deal with Prohibition-era restrictions on brewing enthusiasts to develop new breweries and businesses. By the early 1990s, the Boston Beer Company was brewing beer, and Ken Grossman of Anheuser-Busch was laying the foundation for others laying the foundation for breweries and beers.

natural brain-drain tendencies that have historically sent its brightest young people elsewhere. The same emphasis on inclusion that would make a town attractive to talented outsiders increases its draw to its own émigrés.

10. *They have big plans.* For the United States as a whole, the very idea of ambitious “national greatness” projects seems preposterous. There’s no money; the only big efforts the government can undertake are military; it now counts as victory simply to keep funding for the national parks, for NASA or NOAA, for health or science research from being cut. For better or worse, it was a different America that built the country’s interstate highways and went to the moon.

Cities, because they *can* do things, still make plans. If I see a national politician with a blueprint for how things will be better twenty years from now, I think: Good luck! In fact, few national politicians even pretend about long-term visions anymore. When a mayor or community council shows me a map of how new downtown residences will look when they’re completed, or where the new greenway will go, I think: I’d like to come back.

Of course, there’s one other marker of a city that is working, perhaps the most reliable gauge. A city on the way back will have at least one craft brewery, maybe more, and probably some small distilleries, too. Until 2014, that would have been an unfair test for Mississippi, which effectively outlawed craft beers by setting maximum alcohol levels at the near-beer level. A generation earlier, it would have been an unfair test for the country as a whole. It was not until the late 1970s that Jimmy Carter, as part of his administration’s deregulatory agenda, finally removed musty Prohibition-era restrictions on home brewing. This in turn allowed brewing enthusiasts to develop new products and expand their markets and businesses. By the early 1980s, local-brewing pioneers like Jim Koch of the Boston Beer Company on the East Coast, with his Sam Adams beer, and Ken Grossman of Sierra Nevada, in the West, were along with others laying the foundation for today’s golden age of distinctive local breweries and beers.

In the late 1970s, the United States had only a few hundred breweries—mainly large, commoditized mass-producers. By 2017, it had more than five thousand—or in practical terms, one or more in any city with creative ambitions for its future. As with any start-up field, not all of these ventures were well thought out, and not all of them could survive. But enough have flourished to make craft breweries one of the most reliable signs of civic energy. A town that has them also has a certain kind of entrepreneur, and a critical mass of mainly young (except for me) customers. It sounds like a joke, but it explains a lot.