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# On Missoula and its Personal Importance

A Lifeplace Essay

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“The world is full of bastards, the number increasing rapidly the further one gets from Missoula, Montana,” said Norman Maclean in his novel *A River Runs Through It*. It took thirteen years of living in Missoula for me to realize this. As one of many Missoula natives, I had the choice of staying in town to go to college, or to fly off to some foreign land and escape the mountains I knew so well. Living in Missoula for most of my life left me dreaming of the tall buildings and bustling nightlife of a larger city. As I neared my senior year of high school, I grew most accustomed to the idea of going to college in my hometown. Yet, I still was not sure it was the correct choice.

To paraphrase a conversation I once overheard while lying on the grass of the UM Oval, “there’s not a stigma against going to university in your home state. Not in Montana, anyway. Where I come from, it was almost disgraceful. State colleges are so easy to get into. But I don’t feel like that applies to Montana.” Though there is less of a stigma against Montanans in this sense, I definitely felt that kind of disappointment when I told other students from outside Montana that I was going to school in-state. To those friends, it was given that they would attend school out of state, unless they happened to live in a state with a well-known university. Not many people come to school in Montana, and my friends wondered why I stayed there instead of joining them on the coasts.

In truth, I was disappointed in myself for a time as well. When I was visiting the Canadian province of Alberta the summer before starting university, I decided to tour my second choice for school while I was in the area. Surrounded by a river and connected to downtown Edmonton only by rail, it seemed like a near perfect place for school. I enjoyed the large number of people running around, the innovative architecture, the papers which brimmed with dates and

times of events, and the amount of culture that came with living in a large city. I enjoyed the tour, but I did not miss the campus until I walked back onto the one I had chosen.

During UM's orientation, it really hit me that I was going to be stuck in the same place I had living for so long for the next four years of my life. The classrooms were new, and there were many students who I had never met before. But the immense number of faces I recognized from high school, the familiar food, the way the third floor of the UC still smelled, and the way I would still be restricted by the relationships I had previously made, created an intense longing for any other university. I had not even started school, but sitting in The Pita Pit with friends I had known since I started public school, I mumbled, "Guys, I think I made the wrong choice."

Of course, it only took a few weeks of school that fall to convince me otherwise. The quick piling of homework reminded me that I would be challenged no matter what university I go to. Funnily enough, calculus equations are universal. Being taught in a different city would do little to change the material. I also realized that even though I had met a number of professors on campus already, there were still many more to get to know. Missoula is even small enough for me to know their children from time to time.

In fact, that is one of the best things about Missoula: At just over a hundred thousand people, this city is just large enough to get lost in and just small enough to always be connected ("City and Town Totals"). I can dress up and go to a concert by an artist I would not normally listen to, attend a showing of art I do not regularly admire, or hang out in a part of town I rarely visit, and it is quite easy for me to never walk past a familiar face. Sometimes I need that kind of getaway, and I love to experience new niches of the city I never knew existed. However, even more often, I enjoy walking downtown and recognizing the frequent customers in the coffee shops or the familiar vendors in the Farmer's Market. I can always rely on the man with

headphones to be in the back of the Break Espresso, the poodle to be in his owner's boutique, and on the kayakers to be paddling below the Higgins Street Bridge. Knowing people helps ground myself in the city, and makes me feel like I am a connected part of the community.

Because of Missoula's small size, it is very easy to become an active part of any community organization. Groups are smaller, which is more of a perk than a downfall; members quickly become indispensable parts of a whole, and anyone's absence is felt by the whole group. This keeps people involved, makes them feel worth something, and prevents people from getting lost in waves of other people who look and act just like them. Each person becomes an individual.

From talking to students who advise Graduation Matters, an initiative in Montana to encourage students to graduate from high school, this is the same pattern that keeps students in smaller towns from dropping out of high school. No one wants to feel unimportant. When students in such small towns spend twelve years of schooling getting to know each other, they feel as if they are a part of something. They have fellow students to help and support them, and therefore shy away from dropping out of school when the pressure comes. It is when students do not have this support system of peers that they feel disconnected from their community and lose interest in being a part of it at all. To put worth on the individual rather than the whole group is one of my favorite ways of running a group or club. Part of that, I feel, would be lost in a larger city.

Over the years, I have had numerous opportunities to travel to larger cities for science fairs. Even though science fair students are competitive by nature, my observations still hold for the rest of the cities I have seen: people are too replicable. If one student does not meet the grade, work as hard, or present themselves as well as other students, they are easily replaced by other

students who would gladly take their job. There is a loss of individuality at these larger universities and cities. If one person is lost, an equally good or even better performing person is found. There is no emphasis to make the current student better, to improve their skills, or to forgive their mistakes.

I get nervous around larger universities because of this. As a student working towards a science degree, I have already spent countless hours doing undergraduate research. Almost every science major has to work in a lab and gain research experience at some point. However, whenever I mess up, drop glassware, dilute solutions incorrectly, or kill my cell cultures, I am reminded that there are hundreds of other student researchers who would be able to perform better. Just because they could do my work just as well or better, I do not want to fear that I am constantly competing against them. I do not want every moment of my time to be a competition. I want to be able to work because I enjoy it, and because I am sincerely interested in doing a job well done. In Missoula, these positions do not feel so much as competitions as they do positions to hold while simultaneously getting to know people. If I were to leave, I would miss the people I work with, and they would miss me. This inability to be easily replaced is one of the reasons why I enjoy working with people in this town so much.

Feeling like an individual also keeps away the feeling of hyperboredom. Introduced to me in Derek Owen's "Place", hyperboredom is a lack of worth stemming from an inability to take part in anything. It most often is associated with large suburbs or crowded cities, which lack parks or public areas in which people can enjoy their lives (Owen 64). Though Missoula can seem like a town deserted of anything interesting to do, especially seeming this way when one is just entering adolescence, it is in fact one of the most exciting places to live in within the US borders. One creates their own fun in Missoula, whether it be biking along the river, housing

wolves as pets, dancing with fire and hoola-hoops, or bending scrap metal into art. Everyone finds a unique hobby to keep themselves occupied. It follows that because of Missoula's small community, anyone who is willing to show off their talents or sell their unusual wares is greeted by much support by the community. Indeed, all this helps to collectively move toward the goal to, "Keep Missoula Weird," as the local bumper stickers always say.

Perhaps this is why so many people I grew up with moved back to Missoula after a year or less of college elsewhere. It baffled me how many friends went away, only to return and join me in my studies at UM. They could never pinpoint the reason as to why they came back; everyone runs around the bush and says the larger city just was not for them, they did not like the campus they thought they did, or the types of people they encountered just rubbed them the wrong way. Regardless, if I had chosen to go to college elsewhere, I would have probably done the exact same. There is little that compares to walking around campus in the early morning, admiring the mountains and the clock tower. When I lean over my textbooks to toss bread to the campus squirrels, I know there is nowhere else I would rather be.

#### Works Cited

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