

The Cultivation of Our Own Tradition

Rowan Jacobsen

Issue no. 3 • June 2005

Those of us who lived in Vermont in decades past, and flew in and out of the state periodically, have all had a certain airport experience. No matter where your connection was for your flight to Burlington—Newark or Philadelphia or Cleveland—as you approached the gate for the flight home, you knew it was the Vermont gate without checking the Departures screen. There were still overalls and white beards. The dental care was spotty. There was no sheen to the crowd. You might have been flying to Albania. This isn't as true as it once was. In some ways, Vermont has caught up with the rest of the country, or, rather, the country has infiltrated Vermont. But it still holds. I still have no trouble distinguishing the Vermont gate from the others. There's a little less makeup, lower heels. People are more likely to be clutching books, more likely to wear their gray hair with pride.

Vermont's difference is even more profound when you enter the state by highway. An immediate sense of peace and well-being sets in, and it usually takes a few miles before you realize this is because the billboards are no longer blaring at you. Instead, the big green curtain has taken over. Vermont is simply different from the rest of the nation—geographically, politically, and culturally—and its difference can be felt at all levels of being. That is exceedingly rare in twenty-first-century America, and it alone may be enough of a reason to take extraordinary steps to preserve that difference. Not long before his death, in a letter to Second Vermont Republic founder Thomas Naylor, the eminent U.S. Ambassador George Kennan wrote, "All power to Vermont in its effort to distinguish itself from the USA as a whole, and to pursue in its own way the cultivation of its own tradition." I like that phrase a lot. The cultivation of its own tradition. It nails what may be the best argument for Vermont independence.

We live in a world that is virtually at war with tradition. Tradition is antiprogress. Tradition gets in the way of economic efficiency. And since we are tied into an economy in which dollars are the only acceptable measure of value (it's how we judge paintings, movie stars, hurricanes, and antiques), this makes tradition unjustifiable. Which means Vermont is in trouble. The National Trust for Historic Preservation just named the entire state of Vermont as one of the nation's most endangered historic places for the second time. That's because we can't justify our small towns, small schools, local agriculture, or traditional patterns of land use in terms of dollars alone. A community isn't worth a dime—at least, not on the open market. If we are to cultivate our own traditions—to let thrive those things that make Vermont unique—we need to detach from the national system.

So long as decisions about our schools, forests, and water are being made by senators from South Carolina, presidents from Texas, and judges from Chicago, Vermont's best interests are not going to be kept in mind. Why should they be? What makes sense for Miami or Des Moines does not necessarily make sense for Vermont. How can Miami and Moretown possibly both cultivate their own traditions under the same set of guidelines—especially when those guidelines are being set in a city at least 600 miles from both? Being part of a gigantic system gives one the illusion of participating in "big" and "important" events, such as wars and billion-dollar elections, but in reality it just allows us to take our eyes off the ball of the "small-time" local issues that have more direct presence in our lives, and that we can greatly influence.

I think it's a mistake to pursue Vermont independence as a protest against anything. It makes the movement symbolic, and the tremendous effort independence will take should not be wasted on

symbolism. I don't care about "sending a message." What I do care about, deeply, is allowing all that is precious in Vermont to survive, and to thrive. Our village commons, our working farms, our loons and moose and thrushes. Our traditions of open-mindedness, self-sufficiency, and generosity. Movements started in anger spark great initial passion, then become lost when the spark flares out, or the target of the anger disappears. Movements started out of love have staying power. There's no question that the things that make Vermont Vermont are under increasing pressure from a variety of external sources. The question is what to do about it. Does Vermont make more sense, does it become more itself somehow, by going its own way? A simple test helps answer this. If Vermont had been an independent republic all along, would you now vote for it to join the United States? Of course not. It would be unthinkable. Which makes inertia the only true argument for sticking with the United States. And inertia has never been the Vermont way.