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Our Town, 1939.

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OUR TOWN
An American Idyl

WRHS
By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver
At
The Temple



On
Sunday morning, January 22, 1939

It would be well, my friends, if we could get away, at times, from the exciting headlines, from crackling events, from world stirring sensations to a quieter reflective mood which brings you up against some of the quiet, enduring things, the patient and elemental processes which go on, sometimes unobserved, which bring you up against a few great problems which are the enduring problems.

It is good to have an occasional rendez-vous with destiny, as it were, so that we restore our perspective, correct our spiritual focus and reduce, a bit, the fever of our lives' agitation. A great book or a great play is a chastening spirit in which, from time to time that should be purged from the mind of the sober man.

Religion has always welcomed plays as a medium of the expression of a great idea. In fact, the origin of the Christian drama is to be found in the religious celebrations, in connection with the festivals. And it was in the Cathedrals and Churches of Medieval Europe that the first plays of the modern world - Mystery plays, Miracle plays, Morality plays - were first produced.

The modern play has, of course, detoured from its original course. It has become secularized like so many activities which originally had their source in religion. But great plays, my friends, whatever their theme and technique, have great spiritual and social messages. In that sense they serve the spiritual and religious needs of human beings.

Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town", which was recently produced in our town, has such a message, without straining away to make it so which, of course, is supreme art. The play touches lightly upon the deeper chords. Yet the great music is unmistakable. You witness, for example, upon a barren stage, quite ordinary human folk who go through

ordinary customary routine in a small town - nothing sensational, nothing exciting. Yet quite suddenly, you are brought up before some amazing revelation which perks you up, which fills your inner soul with anguish, not alone for yourself, for the simple ordinary folk on that barren stage, but for the world and all mankind. You are caught up in the relentless grip of destiny of folk so brave and so fine and yet so helpless and defenseless in the face of time and circumstance and oblivion.

You listen to the speech of these simple folk, strangely New England in accent, speaking of quite simple, local and homely things, provincial matters of interest only to that community in the foothills of New Hampshire. Yet suddenly, the speech takes on cosmic significance. You hear the Organ Music of Humanity.

All is dexterously and cunningly done by a fine artist. You are introduced to these people of our town against the background of the town itself, the town which they and their ancestors built, the town of which they are both symbols and products. The town and the people are pictured against the larger background of the State, the country, the world and the universe and the Mind of God.

So that Grover's Corner becomes very significant because it is in the mysterious universe of God, and the inhabitants of Grover's Corner become greatly significant because of the majestic life that ~~flows~~ flows through them. Thus, in the hands of this skillful artist, all space is telescoped into Grover's Corner and all time, as well.

The Play shuffles between the past, the present and the future. You are taken from the past to the future and back again into the present, so that at all times, past, present and future become rather incidents which they undoubtedly are in the sight of God. For the sake

of your bearings, you are given a point in space - Grover's Corner, a small town. Twenty-six hundred folk inhabit that small town. The town lies on the old archaeanozoic granite of the Appalachian Range and is settled, for the most part, by blue-eyed English in the seventeenth century. Since then, there has been some influx of Slav and Mediterranean types. Also you are given, for the sake of your bearings, a point in time - 1903-1913. But you are reminded that there are other years to come, the awaiting actors, the full story of whose lives is not completed within the limits of these years. And thus, within this cyclorama of endless time and space, you are invited to focus your attention upon the particular in the general, upon a small town and its simple townfolk, "in their growing up and in their marrying and in their doctoring and in their living and in their dying."

You are shown by this artist in this play, vignettes, segments of life, just samples, as it were, in the lives of these people, from birth to death, the life of the town from dawn to dusk.

The stage manager is the seeing eye of man. He is something like the old Greek chorus. He is the wise commentator upon all that transpires. He expatiates on all that home-spun philosophy. Occasionally the stage manager himself takes part in the play.

This play really has no plot at all. How many lives of human beings have plots? Human lives like the lives of towns and cities have history, but no plots. Except for the inevitable processes - life and death, growth and decay, circumstance and accident, joy and sorrow, the original raw material of which all plots are derived. The raw material for great drama is there and is sometimes suggested in a sentence, in a

fleeting moment on the stage.

Thus, for example, you are introduced to Joe Crowell, Jr. very early in the morning, a cold morning, just at dawn. Little Joe Crowell is out delivering the paper. He meets Dr. Gibbs, tired and fatigued returning from an all night vigil at the side of some patient. They chat and you hear that little boy so full of interest, life, hope. And a little further on in the play you are told by the stage manager that "Joe was a very bright fellow. He graduated with honors and got a scholarship to Boston Tech - M.I.T., that is. But the War broke out and Joe died in France. All that education for nothing." That is all that is said of Joe. But here is material for drama untold.

Or, take the case of Mrs. Gibbs. Mrs. Gibbs is busy from morning unto night taking care of her household, her husband and children. She cooks, she scrubs, she sews. There is not an idle moment in her life, not a weeks vacation.

We meet her on the stage chatting with Mrs. Webb. She has been offered \$350 for grandmother's highboy and is tempted to sell it. She has only to persuade the Dr. to make a trip. Ever since she was that high she dreamed of Paris, France. "Once in your life before you die," she said "you ought to see some country where they don't talk English and don't even want to."

And it is not until the end of the play, in the cemetery, in the ~~hi~~ wind swept hill-top over looking Grover's Corner that you get to learn that Mrs. Gibbs never got to take that trip. She did sell the highboy, but by the time she got around to it, she died, and her child, Emily, grown up, now also dead, inherited it, invested it, with her husband in a new barn and a new drinking foundation for the stock. And in this simple

episode, there is also rich material for great drama.

Or take the case of Simon Stimson who appears on the stage just once and never says anything. He appears again, and says just a word or two. We meet him at the close of the play, also among the dead. Simon Stimson ^{was} the church organist. He believed that music came into the world "to give pleasure". But he was not meant for a small town and for small town life. There was no room for his wings. And so he became unhappy and rebellious and got into a peck of trouble. He took to drink. He finally hung himself in the attick and left his own epitaph. It is inscribed on his tombstone - just a few bars of music.

There is drama, here, too.

Or, you come across, in this most interesting play, a sentence like this:

As he takes you around the wind-sept hill-top, he points to some graves. "Over there are some Civil War veterans too. Iron flags on their graves...New Hampshire boys...had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they'd never seen more than fifty miles of it themselves. All they knew was the name, friends - the United States of America. The United States of America. And they went and died about it."

But a character like Simon Stimson is entirely out of character in "Our Town". "Our Town" is a nice town, made ^{up} of dependable, honest folk of good stock. In "Our Town" they don't have to lock their front doors at night. Nobody remarkable ever came out of "our town". But the folks love nature, the trees, the skies, with all their seasons. The people of "Our Town" are not beset with industrial problems of the bigger cities, with strikes slums. They are not much concerned with solving the problems of social economics. They try to take care of those who can't help themselves and those who can, they leave alone. The children

of the town grow up, not spoiled or indulged. Most of them go to high school. They get married. They bear children. They build decent homes in moral health! The women folk do their own housekeeping. They never think of themselves as hard-used, and there are no nervous-breakdowns among them. It is a good, wholesome American community, far kinder and gentler than Sinclair Lewis' "Main Street. It is far more normal and wholesome than Sherwood's "Winesbury, Ohio".

And in this community, George, the Gibbs boy and Emily, the Webb girl grow up. They love each other from childhood and marry. The story of their tender, pure, innocent love, their apprehensions on the very threshold of their wedding hour constitutes one of the many charming episodes of this play.

The dramatist here probes the depths and hidden recesses of the human spirit. And so life moves on in our town from morning until night, from spring through summer to autumn and winter. And so also death.

And we are taken in the last act to the windy hilltop where all the past of all families, where all the futures will be. This is certainly an important part of Grover's Corner. And it is here, in the presence of the dead and in the presence of the living who are bringing their most recent dead to the new graves, it is here that the drama rises to its cosmic sweep. What is death? And why are the living afraid to die? What is life? Why are the living so blind? Why are not people reconciled either to life or to death? And what is there for man on either side of the grave?

Not ponderously, not pedantically, not dogmatically, does he attempt to answer these questions, but with flashes and with occasional flashes

of insight, he illumines them. He parts a curtain here and there. He opens a door. The dead are seated on the stage quite without stiffness and in a patience without restlessness. Mrs. Gibbs is there. Simon Stimosn is there. Wally Webb, brother of Emily, is there and many others are there. They are shedding their mortality. Slowly through the years they are being inducted into the eternal. Gradually they are being weaned away from the earth, from the ambitions they had, the pleasures, the things they suffered, from the things they loved. They reminisce of their days upon earth, some wistfully, some resentfully, some already without any emotion at all.

And Emily, whom we knew in the first act as a charming little girl, in the second act as a young bride, Emily is now being borne to her grave. She died in childbirth, in giving birth to her second child. She is not reconciled to death. She wants to be on the farm again. She wants to hold her baby on her lap again. She is advised not to do it.

Emily does not realize that the knowledge of the future would make any day and any experience quite intolerable to bear. It is possible for one to live. But it is impossible to watch oneself live, knowing the future, knowing all that is to follow. She wants to go back and she goes back. She chooses a twelfth birthday. She returns home to Grover's Corner. Time retraces and she is a little girl again. Her folks are young again. And Emily says softly:

"I can't bear it. They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I'm here. I'm grown up. I love you all, everything. -- I can't look at everything hard enough. There's the butter-nut tree." She wanders up Main Street.

"There's Mr. Morgan's drugstore. And there's the High School, forever and ever, and ever. And there's the Congregation Church where I got married. Oh, dear, Oh, dear, Oh, dear!"

The Stage Manager becons partially to her. He points to the house. She says a breathless "yes" and goes to the house.

"Good morning, Mama."

Mrs. Webb - at the foot of the stairs, kissing her in a matter-of-fact way.

"Well, now, dear, a very happy birthday to my girl and many happy returns. There are some surprises waiting for you on the kitchen table."

Emily: "Oh, Mama, you shouldn't have." (She throws an anguished glance at the Stage Manager) "I can't - I can't."

Mrs. Webb: (Facing the audience, over her stone.) "But birthday or no birthday, I want you to eat your breakfast good and slow. I want you to grow up and be a good strong firl." (She goes to the stairs and calls). "Wally! Wally, wash yourself good. Everything's getting cold down here. (She returns to the stone with her back to Emily. Emily opens her parcels. "That in the blue paper is from your Aunt Carrie and I reckon you can guess who brought the post card album. I found it on the doorstep when I brought in the milk - George Gibbs...must have come over in the cold pretty early ...right nice of him."

Emily: (To herself). "O George! I'd forgotten that..."

Mrs. Webb : "Chew that bacon slow. It'll help keep you warm on a cold day."

Emily: (Beginning softly but urgently)

"O, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me.

Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too, Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it - don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another.

Mrs. Webb: "That in the yellow paper is something I found in the attic among your grandmother's things. You're old enough to wear it now, and I thought you'd like it."

Emily: "And this is from you. Why, Mama, it's just lovely and it's just what I wanted. It's beautiful!" (She flings her arms around her mother's neck. Her mother goes on with her cooking, but is pleased.)

Mrs. Webb: "Well, I hoped you'd like it. Hunted all over. Your Aunt Norah couldn't find one in Concord, so I had to send all the way to Boston." (Laughing) "Wally has something for you, too. He made it at Manual Training class and he's very proud of it. Be sure you make a big fuss about it. -- Your father has a surprise for you, too; don't know what it is myself. Sh - here he comes."

Mr. Webb: (Off stage) "Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?"

Emily: (In a loud voice to the Stage Manager) "I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another." (She breaks down sobbing. At a gesture from the Stage Manager, Mrs. Webb disappears). "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back - up the hill - to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths..and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

(She looks toward the Stage Manager and asks abruptly, through her tears)
Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -"

Stage Manager: "No" (Pause) "The saints and poets, maybe O they do some."

Emily: "I'm ready to go back". (She returns to her chair beside Mrs. Gibbs). "Mother Gibbs, I should have listened to you. Now I want to be quiet for a while. - Oh, Mother Gibbs, I saw it all. I saw your garden."

Mrs. Gibbs: - "Did you, dear?"

Emily: "That's all human beings are! - Just blind people."

Mrs. Gibbs: "Look, it's clearing up. The stars are coming out."

The dead: "Goodness! That ain't no way to behave! - He ought to be home."

Emily: "Mother Gibbs?"

Mrs. Gibbs: "Yes, Emily?"

Emily: "They don't understand much, do they?"

Mrs. Gibbs: "No, dear, not very much." (The Stage Manager appears on the right, one hand on a dark curtain which he slowly draws across the scene. In the distance a clock is heard striking the hour very faintly.)

Stage Manager: "Most everybody's asleep in Grover's Corners. There are a few lights on: Shorty Hawkins, down at the depot, has just watched the Albany train go by. And at the livery stable somebody's setting up late and talking. - Yes, it's clearing up. There are the stars - doing their old, old criss-cross journeys in the sky. Scholars haven't settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there. They're just chalk...or fire. Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. The strain's so bad that

every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest. (He winds his watch.) Hm...Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners. - You get a good rest, too. Good night."

Fill each day and each hour of each day with all the beauty and all the worthwhileness you can crowd into them. Do not be afraid of death. Whether you live in Grover's Corners or in Cleveland, whether you live in a quiet small town on the foothills of the White Mountains, whether in a roaring town, the tasks are just as great, the opportunities are just as great. Human hearts are the same everywhere and the same destiny, my friends, awaits all, a wind-swept field or a hill-top under the stars.



1/ Good to get away - exciting headlines - crackling events - word-storming
sensations - to quieter mood of a reflector - which brings you
up against - the quiet, evolving - patient & elemental processes
few great problems -

Our needs such an occasional Rendezvous with Destiny -
to rest - correct focus - Reduce Fever - ag. takes

A great book - Chastening exp - Catharsis -

2/ Rel - always welcomed the Play - Medium -

In fact - Original -

It was in Cathedrals - Mystery Plays - Miracle - Unaltered

Modern Play - detoured - secularized - like so many

But great Plays - Whatever - have great ^{social} message
serve needs.

3/ Thornton Wilder's - "Our Town" - recently - has such
with out shunning away to walk

It touches lightly on the deeper chords - yet great music
is unmistakable.

You witness upon a barren stage ordinary - going thru
routine - small town - and suddenly - jerked up
- which makes you in your soul yearn - caught up
- felt so brave - fine - helpless - in face of Time - Chances
& Oblivion

You listen to their speeches - strongly h. England in account

speaking of local & homely things - Provincial matters of interests
only to little community - foothills of New Hampshire
and suddenly - the content, their speech takes on cosmic
sweep - You hear the Organ Music of Humanity

4/ All dexterously & cunningly done - by fine Artist.

You are introduced to people of "Our Town" - against
the Background, their town - which they & ancestors
built - of which they - Symbol & Product

Town & everyone in it - pictured against Background, Stage
Grover's Corner becomes sign. here it is in the
mysterious Unveiling of God - Denizens - majestic
life of God flows

Thus all space is telescoped into Grover's Corner
And so is all time - Play shuttles backward -
You are taken from the Past
Past-present-future - incidents - as they are - God

For the sake of your hearings - You are given this point
in space - a small town, 2,640 - lying on the old
Archaeozoic Granite of the Appalachian Range -
Settled for the most part, by blue-eyed, brachycephalic
English - 17C - Since then some influx of Slav
& Undertaken - types.

You are also given your point in Time - Year 1901-1904-1913

But you are reminded that there are other years coming -
awaiting other actors - whose story is not unfolded

Then within Cyclorama of endless time & space

You are invited to concentrate - Particulars in the
General -

{ Watch small town & its simple town folk

{ "in their growing up and in their marrying and in
their doctoring and in their living and in their dying"

5/ You are shown Vignettes - Segments - Samples
from dawn to Night - from Birth to Death

The Stage Manager - the "Seeing Eye" of Man - The
Great Chorus - is the wise Commentator -

exhibits - expatiates - ham-spun philosophy - spread
occasionally takes part in the play itself -


6/ Really no Plot! How many lines - Human beings
like towns - History -

Except as the inevitable processes - life, death, growth
decay - circumstances accident - Skies - Un-stuff

© Thus early in Play - Joe Crowell Jr. - Old Dr. Gibbs
- chat - no full - (Just)

There is Simon Stimson. He appears any time on
the stage without a word to say a few words. Another
time he appears without saying a word. And then
we find him among the dead on the windy hill top.
Simon Stimson was the chuck against - who loved
music deeply - "Music, he believed, came with the
world to give pleasure" - But the little town he
lived in had made ^{no room for his music} in small town life. He took to drink.
He became rebellious - suicide on life & He took to
drink - and hung himself in the attic. He
chose his own epitaph - just some notes music...

Drama him

And stirring dramatic material  U.S. 5 America

But a character like Simon Stimson was not a
character in "Our Town".

It ~~was~~ is a nice town - of simple good, dependable
folk - ^{just stuck} - Don't have to look for this kind of thing at all -
Nobody ever remarkable ever came out of it -
No much culture - but great love of nature - of trees
& plants & birds & the other -

Not beset with the industrial problems, the
big cities - with shams & stunts and technology.
Unemployment.

Its citizens are not much concerned with
social problems of social injustice & inequality.

6
They try to talk care, those that can't help themselves,
and those that can they leave alone"

4. The children, the town ^{- not started a wild party} run up to High school - They get married - Been
children - Decent homes - Moral health!

5. The women ^{consistent} plth - do their own house-keeping -
never that of Eis hard-wood either, have a
new knave-down among them.

~~and the town~~
6. A good, wholesome American Community -
Kinder, ^{less raw} friendlier ^{pioneer town} than Main Street has
dealing best with individual problems. And
"No delictum" - far more normal and wholesome
than Shenandoah "wine buy, then".

~~More truly American in its traditions~~

6. In this community George, Gibbs boy, and Sam,
Webb put - run up - look each other from
childhood - and are married. And so they, their
people live - & of these tender pure innocent
love their marriage, constitutes on the moving
beautiful episode, the play.
The dramatist probes deep into the hidden recesses
of the human soul.

how they seal their destiny at the counter?
Mr. Morgan's drug-store - 7



⑥ Take Mrs. Grells - busy from - not an idle - Seen
chatting - Mrs. Webb - same sturdy -
Offered \$350 - Grandmother Highboy - If she could
get doctor to talk money - Trup -

Ever since she was that high - that - Pans
"Once in your life before you die you ought to
see a country where they don't talk & think in
English, and don't even want to..."

It is not until end of Day - Cemetery - never
got to make trip - Did sell - By time
Her child Emily - now also dead - inherited -
invested - barn - drinking fountain for state

(c) Simon Stimson - Appears - Wendy Huelts
church organist - "Music came to give men
pleasure" not made for small-town life - (Epitaph)

7/. But a character like Simon - not a character
Nice Town - simple, dependable - good stock
Don't have to lock their front door at night
Nobody ever remarkable
not much culture - love nature
not hesitant individual problems - shows
not much concerned - solving problems

7/ And so life moves on in "Our Tam" - and also 18
death. And ~~the~~ on the windy hilltop, is all
the part of "Our Tam" - and also all its future -
~~the certainly is (note)~~
And it is here in the presence, the ~~long~~ dead, and
the ~~members~~ ^{living} ~~assembly~~ ^{they must meet} to the ~~last~~ ^{newest} ~~moment~~
game, that the drama rises to its full comic
wrap: what is death? and why are the living afraid
to die? What is life and why are the living so
blind to the fullness privacy of life? Why are
not people reconverted either to death or to life?
What is there beyond the man or other
side of the grave?



Not ponderously, not pedantically, not
dogmatically does the author answer these questions -
but with flashes to illuminate them. He parts
a curtain here & there. He opens a door.
← The dead are there seated upon the stage in
a quiet without stiffness and in a patience
without restlessness! Yes - Gubbins is there.
Simon Sturgeson and others - + Wally Webb.
Evenings brother.
(They are shedding their mortality slowly than the
bean they are heavily inducted into the eternal.)

Gradually they are letting hold, the ^{long} ~~unhappy~~ ^{unhappy} dream of the 19
ambition they had - the pleasure - the things they
suffered - the people they loved. They

~~They are~~ They reminisce of their days upon earth.
~~Emily is now~~
~~Soon~~ ~~isn't fully~~ ~~soon~~ ~~resentfully~~ ~~some~~ already without
any emotion at all.

← Emily is now ~~being~~ ^{home to her gran} ~~home to her gran~~ ^{She died}
~~in childhood~~. ~~She is not reconciled to death~~! She
wants to ~~return~~ go back - to be on the farm again.
- her baby in her lap -

Advised not to! ^{Many try!} ~~Come~~ ^{Soon} come
back! ~~She~~ ^{do not} realize that the ~~Kunzeberg~~
the future would make any day & any experience
intolerable to bear. One can live! One
cannot watch one self living - knowing
all that is to follow!

She chooses her 12th birthday. She
returns home - ^{Trin} is retraced. She
is a little girl again. ^{Her folks -} ^{Yany}
again - (Jish) p. 121

8/ "Do any human beings ever realize life while
they live it? every, every minute?"

13th x 15th

The U.S. Garden of Eden

(10)

9/ To fill each day - with beauty - just for each

And whether you live in Garden Corner - a
Cleveland - in any small town - or roaring
metropolises - the Task is just as plain - the Opportunity
is just as many - the Human hand - the same every where - and the same destiny -
a word-swept field - the top - under the
stars -

"

Take Joe Crowell, Jr:

Joe was a very bright fellow. He graduated with honors and got a scholarship to Boston Tech., - M.I.T., that is. But the War broke out and Joe died in France. All that education for nothing" —

R. G. Obs.: "John, when I married you, do you know what our very first year was in getting married? I was afraid we weren't going to have material for conversation now or last as a few weeks. I was afraid we'd run out and eat our meals in silence, that's a fact. You and I've been conversing for 20 years now with out any notable barren spells."

"This certainly is an important part of human corners. A lot of thoughts come up here, night and day, but there is no part free."

"Over there are some Civil War veterans too. Iron flags as their graves. New Hampshire boys had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they'd never seen more than 50 miles of themselves. All they knew was the name, friends — the U.S. of America. The U.S. of America. And they went and died about it." —

U.S.