

The news from Lake Wobegon

He's kidding, but there's a moral to the story

By Thom H. Donlin-Smith

Like many people, I was introduced to the stories of humorist Garrison Keillor through *Prairie Home Companion* on National Public Radio. It was just plain fun. However, it began to occur to me that there are substantial moral lessons imbedded in Keillor's works and that his tales of "Lake Wobegon" exemplify the power of stories in human life.

Keillor's stories are unified, interconnected wholes, and they communicate the truth that our lives and relationships are that way too. He has a gift for weaving together a variety of disparate topics.

For example, in his book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, there is a six-page vignette that explores and ties together exaggerated childhood fears of perils as diverse as icicles, Catholics, wild dogs, his tongue freezing to a pump handle, and the cruelty of older kids. The moral lesson is that life is a web. Seemingly unrelated issues and relationships are more deeply connected than we often realize.

The citizens of Lake Wobegon are not entirely predictable. There are surprises in the stories that leave us asking, "what happened next?"

Human beings act freely and intentionally and therefore, as the title chapter from *Leaving Home* indicates, life is a place where "Anything Can Happen." When

anything can happen, life is not hopeless.

Keillor's stories wind around and entertain us, but he always gets to some sort of conclusion, or as he calls it, "a point of rest, a point of contemplation."

This is not the same thing as a cheap and easy "moral of the story" such as one gets from a fable. But the subtle moral lesson is that our lives have turning points and contemplation points where purpose and meaning become apparent.

His stories tend to be simple — one would not usually describe them as having several layers of meaning, or being open to several interpretations. But they realistically admit to an ugly side to life in Lake Wobegon.

It can be a town of intolerance, meanness, narrow-mindedness, simplistic convictions, and stifling consciousness.

This is the message of a bitter ex-resident of Lake Wobegon who sends his "95 Theses" to the *Lake Wobegon Herald-Star* (owned, by the way, by *Herald Star*).

Keillor presents them as a 22-page footnote in *Lake Wobegon Days* without disputing them. His story, like Lake Wobegon itself, goes complacently along without paying them any heed.

Here is a moral lesson about the importance of humility and conscientiousness. Most of us could benefit from a dose of critical self-examination, but this is largely missing in Lake Wobegon. No wonder Keillor describes it as a little town "the years cannot improve."

KEILLOR is often described as a spokesman for the traditional values and way of life of the Midwest and small towns everywhere.

For all the foibles of Lake Wobegon's people, the targets of his satire are just as often outsiders, residents of the town who are anxious to leave, and in general all the more "worldly" types who might show disdain toward Lake Wobegon.

However, he recognizes that the small-town lifestyle is unattractive to many peo-



Garrison Keillor in New York City, where he broadcasts 'The American Radio Theater.' He's appearing at the Finger Lakes Performing Center in Canandaigua at 8 p.m. Friday.

ple and that it continues to erode in modern America. His younger characters, like adolescents everywhere, question and sort out their loyalties to the people, places, and principles of their upbringing.

For example, in *Lake Wobegon Days*, he recalls teen-age experiments with foreign accents and foreign identities. Elsewhere he describes the *Herald-Star's* readership as largely composed of people who "don't live there anymore (and wouldn't if you paid them)" but who subscribe for "fresh evidence of a life worth leaving" and who have found good jobs elsewhere and "can afford to be nostalgic."

The moral seems to hover somewhere between sadness for the passing of a venerable way of life and an assertion that — for better or worse — we never really escape the grip of our upbringing.

As a teacher of ethics courses, I am interested in finding richer, more humane, and more interesting ways of studying ethics than I was exposed to as a student. Keillor's stories provide us the history of the persons involved, an understanding of their character (and its sources), the trajectory of their lives.

For example, in *Leaving Home* we read about "old man Tollerud." Tollerud is not a very endearing fellow, and yet we and his bitter son develop more sympathy for him as we come to better understand his difficult personal history.

Keillor's readers sometimes wonder whether the stories they are reading are true. They resonate with our own experiences. They are fiction, but as with any good story, they disclose human truth.

If we find in them some indication of how to be a responsible and humane parent, sibling, child, friend or citizen, we have learned something valuable indeed. If this is the case, the final lesson is that a good story is true where it counts; it is morally true.

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