

## COLUMNS

■ Garrison Keillor

# Guilt helps to fuel the doing of many good works

I was in Roanoke, Va., last month and heard a story from a truck driver about a man in a small town who was killed 30 years ago when his car was hit broadside by a truck in a spring thunderstorm while he was parked at 3 a.m. with another man's wife alongside the highway.

News got around town that his body was naked in the wreckage.

The woman, only slightly injured, left town two days later on a Greyhound bus.

At the man's funeral, the minister preached a fire and brimstone sermon, saying that some things a man just can't get away with, and a few weeks later the minister was discovered late at night in the church office naked with his young secretary and he and his wife and three children had to leave town.

So did the secretary.

I thought about this story as I drove through small towns with churches in them. Adultery is hard on a small town because it can cause sudden population loss, and usually it's the wrong people who get run out. Sinners are more important to a town's economy than saintly people are, and they are better citizens. A gnawing sense of guilt makes them more willing to serve on committees.

The value of hypocrisy is that it lets a town keep sinners around without having to be aware of them all the time. That Virginia town that lost eight residents through two acts of adultery — a motel with a blind desk clerk would have saved them all a lot of misery.

So it's no wonder the South has some of the prettiest places in America, handsome old cities like Roanoke and lovely small towns where, despite Wal-Mart, there is still a Main Street and farms with old barns that are graceful and beautifully proportioned. These places are monuments to people who gave a damn, took their time to build well and tried to fit into the landscape because they had a healthy sense of shame.

The miles of brutal architecture you see along freeways — those are the monuments to our time, the age of Complete Disclosure. In our time, the dead man's mistress would have gone on *Oprah* ("Women in Illicit Relationships That Ended With a Traffic-Related Fatality") and the minister and the secretary would have stood up in front of the congregation and declared that illicit love had opened

their hearts to a deeper sense of caring, and the minister's wife would have sued the school of theology for negligence in failing to emphasize the Seventh Commandment.

Nobody would leave town. Everybody would be too busy explaining themselves. And the town would get uglier and uglier. Let's put it this way: There are forms of openness that make hypocrisy look awfully good, bud.

Sinners aren't supposed to talk honestly about what led them to do what they did. They are supposed to feel bad and work it off by restoring some Victorian storefronts, coaching kid baseball and serving on the city council.

That's what makes America great.

A city like Roanoke ("The Star City") with its handsome old market district full of bookstores, bars, antique stores and slow food joints is not built by running people out of town.

I went to a Kiwanis Club luncheon in an old hotel downtown, the ballroom full of people who stood and sang the national anthem and sang it intensely.

They recited the Pledge of Allegiance and were called to order by a woman president — the Kiwanis was a male stronghold not so long ago — and the invocation was addressed to "the Universal Power that comforts and sustains us all," so as not to offend the non-deists.

Suddenly I could see a future for Roanoke, if it had enough people like the Kiwanians, hearty traditionalists with the wit to adapt and keep up with the times, people with enough holes in their underwear to make them careful crossing streets.

The main speaker was a windbag from out of town, and when he was done I asked the man next to me if there were still moonshiners operating around Roanoke, which used to be famous for it.

"You want some corn liquor, I'll give you some," he said, and we went out to his car and he fished from the trunk a half-gallon glass jar full of clear liquid and put it in a grocery sack and gave it to me. I offered to pay.

"No," he said, "it wasn't given to me on that basis."

I took it back to the motel and found that the cap on the jar leaked. So it was necessary for me and some people I know to drink it all that night.

We drank it on the motel balcony, without ice, out of paper cups, and one cup seemed to lead naturally to the next, so I got very drunk, but in the morning I had no hangover, as one would have with legal whiskey.

I felt guilty about that, of course, to have gotten smashed and suffer no pain afterwards, and I have been going around quietly doing good ever since.

If there is anything I can do for you, I hope you will let me know.

■ Garrison Keillor is the author, most recently, of *The Book of Guys*. ■

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