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Tribune file photo

Keillor

Garrison Keillor: Midwesterners set society's values

By **TERRY RINDFLEISCH**
Of the Tribune staff

Garrison Keillor is known far and wide as a humorist, but on Monday in La Crosse he showed he could also be a preacher and social critic.

Decrying the direction in which society is heading, Keillor said Midwesterners are the people who will define American culture for years to come.

More than 250 people joined Keillor for a 7 a.m. breakfast at Viterbo College. Keillor, creator of "A Prairie Home Companion" radio series, began a barnstorming promotional tour of public radio and Minnesota Public Radio that took him to La Crosse, Winona, Minn., and Rochester, Minn.

For 90 minutes, Keillor's talk was filled with wit and humor. But it also was a serious sermon on values and culture.

"I feel our culture is deeply slipping away," Keillor said.

It was a culture, he said, that loved talk, humor, good literature and writing, and believed in civic good.

The country is meaner and more violent today and filled with "strange anger," he said. "We adore fame and wealth more than we admire ingenuity and hard work."

Midwesterners will define the American culture, he said.

"We're still inventing our culture, still deciding who we are, still fighting it out," Keillor said.

Some of the voices on radio believe the label of a liberal or conservative is the definition of a person, Keillor said. In the Midwest, people are the greatest asset and more important than

any label, he said.

Midwesterners do not pity themselves, he said, adding that they work their own way out of difficulties and know the therapeutic benefits of hard work.

"If you do your job, then you can look anyone else in the eye," he said. "Readiness to pitch in gives us standing."

Midwesterners are also brought up to be polite, and believe in education, Keillor said. But they are also small-minded and self-righteous, two traits more responsible for lost population than lack of jobs, he said.

"We're holding other people to very high standards," he said.

There needs to be a cultural spirit of tolerance, forgiveness and humor to overcome self-righteousness, Keillor said.

"You're no more a Christian by going to church than you are an automobile by sleeping in a garage," he said.

Keillor said his family came to Minnesota in the 1880s from Canada. "They came here because of false advertising," he said. "If they had cheap airfare, they would have gone back. Lack of transportation kept our ancestors here."

Norwegian culture was lost when people switched from their native tongue to a "clunky, strange language." The food and customs are only souvenirs of the culture, he said.

In the northern European culture, we're expected to expect the worst, Keillor said. "It's not good luck to enjoy your good luck," he said. "If you enjoy it, you'll lose it."

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Keillor said his mother never left the house without seeing in her mind the house bursting into flames. If you tell a farmer he has a nice-looking crop, the farmer usually replies, "To you, it does," or "It looks pretty good now, but just wait," he said.

New Yorkers talk about people from the Midwest in a patronizing way, Keillor said. In New York, when he says he's from Minnesota, he gets a strange look from people.

"They are searching the hard drive," he said. "They know it's cold here."

Keillor said he tells them it gets so cold for five months that spit sounds like a handful of dimes dropping. Midwesterners usually tell New Yorkers that the Midwest is a good place to bring up children, he said.

"We need places where we can live," he said.

The only disadvantage of living in Minnesota, Keillor said, is that two or three times a year nature makes a serious attempt to kill its residents. And the month of March, he said, was designed by God "to show people who don't drink what a hangover is like."